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M/M

Stray Kids (Band)

Han Jisung | Han/Lee Minho | Lee Know
Hwang Hyunjin/Kim Seungmin
Lee Felix/Seo Changbin

Han Jisung | Han

Lee Minho | Lee Know
Lee Felix (Stray Kids)
Yang Jeongin | I.N
Hwang Hyunjin
Stray Kids Ensemble
Bang Chan (Stray Kids)
Seo Changbin
Kim Seungmin (Stray Kids)

Dancer Lee Minho | Lee Know
Murder Mystery
Han Jisung | Han-centric
Friends to Lovers
Slow Burn
Friendship
Redemption
Crime
Chaebol Han Jisung
Choreographer Lee Minho | Lee Know
no beta we die like men
Past Relationship(s)
Implied/Referenced Suicide
Implied/Referenced Cheating
Implied Relationships
Other Additional Tags to Be Added
Tags Are Hard
Lee Minho | Lee Know-centric
Angst and Hurt/Comfort
Everyone Needs A Hug
Betrayal

English Part 1 of Haven

In the Shadows of Haven

Infinity128

Summary:

Han Jisung, secret Heir to Han Holdings, is majoring in business to meet his parents' expectations. His true passion lies in his secret life as J.One, an underground musician.

Lee Minho is a celebrated choreographer at Miroh Music Group. His life takes a dramatic turn when he becomes a suspect in the murder of a well-known person from the industry.

“Something happened Jisung. I’m not sure. I need your h-help. I didn’t know who else to call.”

Chapter 1 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149225068>): Preface

Notes:

Hey, This is my first fic on here and my writing sucks for most parts but I promise it gets better in the later chapters. I'm making some edits(Sept. 21) in the initial chapters which would not change the storyline much for those who have

been here all along.

Happy Reading!

Jisung glanced up at the familiar chime of the café door, his heart pounding with a flicker of hope. But it was just another stranger walking in, not the person he had been waiting for. His body relaxed slightly, though the knot of tension in his chest remained. That was the seventh time in the past hour. He cast a quick glance at the clock above the door—30 minutes past the time they were supposed to meet.

His hands trembled as he glanced outside the café window. They were still there, sitting on the chair just outside the café, staring at him. They had been watching him for the past hour, making no effort to hide it.

Jisung tore his gaze away from them, forcing his hands to stop shaking before anyone noticed. The thought of someone asking him if he was okay filled him with dread. If they did, he might break down, and then everything would fall apart.

No. He couldn't lose it. Not now.

He felt the burn of unshed tears pricking at his eyes, but he blinked them away quickly. He wouldn't cry. Not here. Not where they could see.

"Hello. Would you like to order anything else?"

The voice startled him. Jisung looked up at the waitress, the same one who had served his nearly-empty Iced Americano an hour ago. He quickly glanced at the time again—7:45 pm. An hour since he'd arrived.

Where was he?

His eyes darted to his phone, the screen showing 13 missed calls and 42 unanswered messages.

"I'd like another Iced Americano, please," he mumbled, trying to buy himself a little more time. He would wait 15 more minutes. That was all.

Just as he was about to put his phone down, it rang. The sudden sound made him flinch, his pulse racing as he stared at the unknown number on the screen.

His first instinct was to ignore it. It wasn't the number he expected, and his gut twisted with unease. But then a sliver of hope crept in. What if it was him?

He hesitated for only a moment before answering.

"H-Hello?" His voice was shaky.

"Sungie..." came the voice from the other end.

Jisung's heart skipped a beat. "H-Hyung? Where are you? Are you okay? You're late! Do you have any idea how many times I've called you? I've been waiting for over an hour! What happened? And whose number is this?" His words tumbled out in a rush, every ounce of his worry spilling over.

"Jisung... I'm sorry. I'm at Cheonghwa-gu Police Station," came the reply, the voice weak, hesitant.

Jisung felt his stomach drop. "Police station? Hyung, what happened? Are you okay?"

"I... I don't know. Something happened, and I need your help. I didn't know who else to call," the voice on the other end faltered, as if struggling to keep it together.

Jisung was already on his feet, bolting out of the café door. He pulled up the map on his phone, his fingers moving rapidly across the screen. Cheonghwa-gu Police Station. It was nearly an hour's drive away from Haneulwon-gu, but if he sped, he could make it in 45 minutes.

"I'm coming, hyung. I'm on my way. Hang in there," Jisung promised, his voice tight as he hurried to his car, heart pounding in his chest.

Chapter 2 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149226271>)

One Month Earlier

"Mr. Han, can you give me an example of how market segmentation can be used to target specific groups?"

Jisung's pen paused mid-doodle. His attention, drifting far from the professor's words, snapped back to the room. He blinked, slowly looking up from his notebook. His mind was blank.

"Uh...Mr. Hwang?"

The professor shifted his gaze from Jisung to Hyunjin, who was sitting just a row ahead.

Hyunjin glanced over his shoulder, his brow raised, as if it were effortless. "A fitness apparel brand could focus on location-based segmentation, like targeting areas with fitness centers. They could also focus on lifestyle segmentation, catering to people with active lifestyles."

"Excellent answer, Mr. Hwang. As for you, Mr. Han, I'd suggest paying more attention to the class," the professor said, giving Jisung a sharp look before turning back to the lecture.

Jisung barely reacted. He simply bowed his head, eyes shifting back to his notebook. His pen resumed its journey across the page, aimlessly sketching, but his thoughts wandered elsewhere, far from the lesson.

When the bell rang, signaling the end of class, Jisung stood up and made his way out the class. His phone buzzed with a message from Felix.

“Hey, Innies here. We’re at Blueprint Café,” the text read.

Jisung smiled slightly as he walked down the hallway, but froze mid-step when he spotted him. Across the hall, Hyunjin stood talking to a guy Jisung had never seen before. He was wearing a university jacket, and seemed to be listening intently to whatever Hyunjin was saying.

Jisung’s eyes narrowed as he watched the stranger laugh at something Hyunjin said. His sharp features were striking, but Jisung didn’t recognize him from any of his classes.

Who the hell was he?

Jisung frowned, his gaze lingering for a moment longer before he tore his eyes away and walked past them. He wasn’t interested in Hyunjin’s life. Not anymore. Whatever Hyunjin did—or whoever he was friends with—was none of Jisung’s concern.

With a huff, he shoved his hands into his pockets and made his way out of the building, heading straight for the café where his friends were waiting.

The familiar buzz of conversation and the clink of mugs greeted him as he walked into Blueprint. He spotted Felix and Jeongin immediately, sitting at their usual spot, and his mood lifted.

Jeongin waved as soon as he saw Jisung approach. “Hyung, you won’t believe what’s happening. I rushed over as soon as I heard.”

Jisung chuckled, pulling Jeongin into a quick hug. “You could at least say hi before you start babbling.”

“Hi, hi, sure,” Jeongin waved off the pleasantries, his eyes bright with excitement. “But do you know what’s happening soon? It’s going to blow your mind! They’ve announced the dates for Haven!”

Haven was the annual university festival, and it was always a big deal. Competitions, performances, events—it was the highlight of the year for both students and faculty.

The three of them settled into their usual banter, chatting and laughing as they sipped their drinks. Despite Jeongin’s fame as one of the top actors in the country and Felix’s growing reputation as a dancer and trainee at Miroh Music Group, their friendship was a constant source of normalcy for Jisung. A celebrity, a trainee, and... well, him. It kept him grounded.

Jisung grinned. “You don’t even go here anymore. Why are you so excited?”

“Oh, come on. He’s basically an honorary student,” Felix laughed, looking up from his phone. “We were just talking about the festival. Jeongin thinks there might be a celebrity judge for the dance competition.”

“You know I’ll be there to support you,” Jeongin added, smirking proudly. “I’m rooting for Felix to win the whole thing.”

Felix blushed slightly. “We were also talking about who the judges could be. Imagine if we got someone huge...”

Before Felix could finish, his attention shifted to something—or someone—behind Jisung. He frowned, squinting as he tried to figure out what was going on.

“What?” Jisung asked, turning in his seat.

Hyunjin had just entered the café, the guy from earlier right beside him. They were heading to a table across the room, but Felix suddenly shot up, waving wildly.

“Hyunjin! Over here!” Felix called out, his voice loud enough to catch the attention of everyone in the café.

Jisung stiffened. The last thing he wanted was to interact with Hyunjin right now. But what really got his attention was the guy with him.

“That’s Lee Minho,” Felix said as the two of them approached their table. “He’s the youngest choreographer at Miroh Music Group. Super strict from what I’ve heard. I didn’t know he went to our university, though.”

Jeongin shook his head. “He doesn’t. He graduated a couple of years ago. I think he was top of his class in dance.”

Jisung’s heart skipped a beat. *Lee Minho*. He had heard of him before, but seeing him in person was something else. The way he carried himself, the intensity in his gaze—it made Jisung’s stomach flutter in a way he couldn’t explain.

Before he could react, Hyunjin and Minho reached their table.

“Hey, Lixie, Innies,” Hyunjin greeted with a grin, his expression shifting into something more pointed as his eyes landed on Jisung. “And Jisung,” he added with a sneer.

Jisung scoffed, folding his arms over his chest. “And the drama queen has graced us with his presence.”

Jisung noticed Minho’s eyes widen just slightly, but the reaction was so subtle he thought he might’ve imagined it.

Felix shot them both a warning glance, clearly not in the mood for their usual bickering. “Can you two please, just once, act civil?”

Felix quickly stepped in, eager to change the mood. “Hi, I’m Felix. These are my friends Jeongin and Jisung,” he introduced, his smile warm and genuine.

“Lee Minho,” the stranger replied simply, his voice calm and even. He offered a polite nod, but his gaze lingered on Jisung a fraction too long.

“Sorry, I need to get going,” Minho added, his tone apologetic but curt. “It was nice meeting you all.”

And just like that, he was gone.

Jisung stared after him, his mind racing. There was something about the way Minho had looked at him—something that didn’t quite add up.

“That was... fast,” Jeongin commented, raising an eyebrow. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, don’t mind him. That’s just how Minho-hyung is,” Hyunjin said, waving it off as he casually stole Jisung’s coffee cup.

Jisung, too lost in his thoughts, didn’t even bother scolding Hyunjin for stealing his drink. *Minho*. Something about him felt different. There was a curiosity there, one that Jisung couldn’t quite shake.

Chapter 3 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149227372>)

Later that evening Jisung’s desk was cluttered with notes and textbooks, the soft hum of his laptop the only sound in the room. He was trying to finish an assignment for the week when his phone vibrated on the desk, pulling him from his focus.

Unknown

8:28 pm **Hey, it’s Minho. We met earlier today? I think I need to apologize. Can we meet at Blueprint if you’re free?**

Jisung blinked, staring at the message for a moment. Minho? As in the guy who barely introduced himself before disappearing earlier? His fingers hovered over the screen.

Jisung

8:28 pm **Uh... Hi. Sure? I can get there in 15 mins.**

Maybe: Minho

8:29 pm **Great.**

Jisung frowned at the screen. This felt weird—meeting someone who had left so abruptly at their first meeting. A million questions ran through his head.

Why was this *Maybe: Minho* apologizing? How did he get Jisung’s number? Was this actually Minho, or could it be someone else? His imagination wandered, and suddenly he envisioned meeting a serial killer at the café.

He bit his lip, shaking his head at his wild thoughts, and sent a quick text.

Jisung

8:31 pm **Lixie, call me in 20 minutes. If I don’t pick up, call the police.**

Felix

8:32 pm **What?**

8:32 pm **Why?**

8:33 pm **What are you doing?**

8:33 pm **Police???**

Jisung ignored the flood of messages and slipped his phone into his pocket. He threw on his jacket and left his apartment, walking the short distance to *Blueprint*. His thoughts were racing. Was he being paranoid? Probably. But better safe than sorry.

As he neared the café, he spotted Minho standing just outside, hands in his pockets, his eyes following the flow of traffic. Jisung exhaled in relief. At least it wasn’t some stranger after all.

To confirm, Jisung dialed *Maybe: Minho*, watching as the man in front of him pulled out his phone and glanced around, searching for the caller.

Satisfied, Jisung approached. “Hey.”

Minho turned, startled. “Jisung! You scared me.”

“I scared you?” Jisung raised an eyebrow. “I was making sure it was really you who messaged me. How did you even get my number?”

Minho rubbed the back of his neck, looking sheepish. “Ah, yeah... I got it from your department. Sorry, I didn’t really think about how that might seem. Let’s head in?”

Jisung, still a bit wary, followed Minho inside the café, but curiosity was quickly overtaking his suspicion.

Once seated, Jisung folded his arms, his tone direct. “So, what’s this about? You were in such a hurry earlier, you didn’t even greet us properly.”

Minho leaned forward, a small smile playing on his lips. “I’ll come clean. I was surprised when you spoke earlier, and I think you noticed.”

Jisung frowned. “Surprised when I spoke? Seriously? That’s rude.”

Minho chuckled softly. “No, no, that’s not what I meant. It’s just that I recognized your voice. You’re J.One, right?”

Jisung froze. He had been called many things in his life, but no one, outside of his closest friends, had ever connected him to his underground persona, J.One.

“You’ve heard of J.One?” Jisung’s voice came out quieter than he intended.

Minho grinned, leaning back in his chair, clearly enjoying Jisung’s reaction. “You could say I’m a fan. I’ve followed your work for a while now. So when you spoke earlier, I had a little fan moment, realized who you were, and panicked. That’s why I rushed off.”

Jisung blinked, still trying to process. Of all the things he had expected, *this* was not one of them. Minho—a well-known choreographer at Miroh Music—was a fan of his secret music? It should’ve alarmed him that Minho figured it out so easily, but instead, Jisung found himself strangely flattered.

“Well... I’m honored. And honestly, a little surprised you figured it out after just one conversation,” Jisung admitted, relaxing slightly.

Before Minho could respond, Jisung’s phone rang loudly, startling them both.

“Lixie,” Jisung muttered as he picked up, already knowing what was coming. “Lix... Felix, I’m fine. Everything is okay. Would you calm down?”

There was a muffled voice on the other end, and Jisung pinched the bridge of his nose.

“No, what do you mean you’re at my apartment?... You called Innies?” He paused, exasperated. “Please tell me you didn’t call the police... Oh, thank God. Look, I’ll be home soon. There’s ice cream in the fridge, okay? Bye.”

Jisung hung up and let out a deep sigh. “I, uh... might’ve texted Felix to call the police if I didn’t answer his call after 20 minutes. So now I have a hysterical Felix and Jeongin waiting at my apartment.”

Minho burst out laughing, his shoulders shaking with amusement. “You thought I was a serial killer?”

Jisung huffed indignantly. “In my defense, I didn’t know who you were for sure! You could’ve been anyone, and I had to be prepared. I don’t even know how you got my number! I couldn’t just ask Felix; he probably wouldn’t have known, and Hyunjin? Hah. He’d lie to me just to mess with my head.”

Minho wiped a tear from his eye, still chuckling. “You’re not wrong about Hyunjin. I guess I should’ve considered that before I texted you out of the blue. But hey, now you know I’m not a serial killer. And I promise I’ll properly introduce myself to your friends next time.”

Jisung rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t help but smile. “I should get going before Felix and Jeongin come to track me down with their slippers.”

Minho nodded, still grinning. “Yeah, I’ll let you go. But seriously, it was nice meeting you properly, Jisung. Next time, let’s skip the drama, yeah?”

As Jisung stood up, he hesitated for a moment before leaning down close to Minho’s ear. “Just so you know, hyung, if you ever reveal J.One’s identity to anyone, I’ll throw you into the Han River.”

He straightened up and flashed a mischievous smile before turning and walking out of the café.

If Jisung had looked back, he would’ve noticed Minho turning a bright shade of crimson at the playful threat.

Chapter 4 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149309320>)

Jisung walked home briskly, the evening’s encounter with Minho still on his mind. His phone vibrated in his pocket, pulling him from his thoughts.

Minho hyung

He smirked, answering the call, “Hyung, missing me already? I just left the café,” he said cheekily.

But when he heard Minho’s voice, all humor drained away. “Jisung. Keep walking and don’t turn around. Someone started following you as soon as you left,” Minho’s urgent tone sent a chill down Jisung’s spine.

His breath hitched. Someone was following him? His feet moved faster on instinct, but his heart pounded with uncertainty. He was only a few meters from his building, yet leading a potential stalker there was a risk he couldn’t afford.

Jisung stopped abruptly, his pulse racing. He scanned the street, but the sparse traffic gave him no sense of security. If they tried anything, he had little cover. “Hyung, what do I do? My apartment is just around the corner. Wait—how do you know they’re following me?” he asked, his voice barely steady.

“I’m right behind them. I think they were waiting for you to leave. Hold on—they’re making a call,” Minhø whispered. There was a brief pause before Minhø inhaled sharply. “They know where you live. They just told someone you’re almost there.”

Jisung’s blood ran cold. He swallowed hard, panic twisting in his gut. “Hyung, I... I think I know who they are. They won’t hurt me. I’ll be fine,” Jisung said, trying to keep his voice steady.

“What the hell, Jisung? Someone’s following you, and you say it’s fine? I’m calling the police,” Minhø snapped, his tone hard with disbelief.

“Hyung, no! Don’t call the police,” Jisung pleaded, his mind racing. He couldn’t risk drawing more attention. “I’ll explain everything. Just come to my place. Please.”

There was a tense silence before Minhø responded. “You better have a damn good explanation,” he muttered, still clearly angry.

Jisung quickened his pace, feeling every step like a countdown. He waited outside the entrance of his apartment building until Minhø caught up, the glare on his face enough to ignite a fire of guilt in Jisung. Together, they climbed the stairs to his third-floor apartment, Jisung feeling the weight of Minhø’s frustration with every step.

Inside, Felix and Jeongin were on the couch, a shared tub of mint chocolate chip ice cream between them. Felix scrambled up the moment he saw Jisung, the ice cream abandoned as he rushed to his side.

“Jisungie!” Felix exclaimed, clutching Jisung’s hands tightly, worry etched across his face.

Guilt knotted Jisung’s chest, and he enveloped Felix in a hug. “I’m sorry, Lix. I didn’t mean to worry you. I went out to meet Minhø, but I didn’t know if it was really him at first. I should have explained.”

Jeongin rolled his eyes from his spot on the couch, clearly exasperated but relieved. It was Jeongin who noticed Minhø lingering by the door, arms crossed, still glaring daggers at Jisung.

“Your guest looks like he’s ready to strangle you, Jisung,” Jeongin noted dryly.

“Yeah, let’s all sit down and get this over with,” Jisung sighed, exhaustion creeping into his voice. He could feel the weight of Minhø’s stare, but he avoided it, focusing instead on gathering his thoughts.

Once they were all seated, Jisung took a deep breath and spoke, his gaze fixed on his hands. “So, I went to meet Minhø at the café, and on the way back, he called me, saying someone was following me.” He heard Felix and Jeongin gasp beside him but pressed on. “What Minhø doesn’t know is that I’m the heir to Han Holdings.”

Minhø’s eyes widened in shock. “Wait—you’re *The Hidden Heir*?”

Jisung let out a humorless chuckle. “Yep. My parents probably sent those people to check on me. Not very discreet, are they?” he said, forcing a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

Minhø’s expression shifted from shock to concern. “You don’t get along with them, do you?”

“No,” Jisung admitted quietly, glancing at Felix and Jeongin, who already knew this story all too well. Felix had been the one to find Jisung years ago, huddled in an alley, broken from a fight with his parents, and the three of them had stuck together ever since.

Felix placed a hand on Jisung’s shoulder, his voice soft but firm. “Jisungie, you need to call them. Talk to them, maybe then they’ll leave you alone.”

Jisung shook his head. “You know I won’t do that, Lix,” he whispered, his voice cracking.

Felix sighed, defeated but understanding. Minhø, sensing the heavy emotional weight in the room, chose not to press further. He shifted, standing up. “I’m sorry for worrying everyone tonight. Jisung, you have some explaining to do, but I’ll leave you guys to it. I should get going.”

Jisung nodded, offering a weak smile. Felix and Jeongin walked Minhø to the door, bidding him goodnight. As the door clicked shut behind them, Jisung let out a shaky breath, running a hand through his hair. Minhø now knew two of his biggest secrets after just one day. That should have terrified him, but somehow, he wasn’t afraid.

He picked up his phone from the counter, only for his stomach to drop at the sight of the messages waiting for him.

Mrs. Han

10:00 PM ***Dinner at 5:00 PM. Saturday.***

Auntie

10:12 PM ***Do not skip this dinner, Jisung. It’s not a request.***

Jisung stared at the screen, his chest tightening. The last time he’d attended a family dinner had been three years ago. The dreaded dinner.

His aunt’s insistence made his skin crawl.

Something was wrong.

Jisung wanted to scream.

The practice room buzzed with the usual anticipation as dancers filled the space, stretching and chatting nervously. Today's rehearsal was different—it was with Lee Minhø, the company's revered and infamous choreographer. Known for his uncompromising standards, the dancers knew they were in for a challenge.

Minhø strode into the room, dressed in his signature all-black attire. His mere presence commanded attention. Conversations halted, and all eyes turned toward him.

"Line up," he ordered, his voice calm but firm. The room quickly snapped into formation, everyone standing at attention, waiting for his next instruction.

Minhø clapped his hands, signaling the start of the music. A familiar beat filled the room, and without a word, he began demonstrating the first sequence of steps. His movements were sharp, deliberate, and executed with effortless precision. The trainees tried their best to mimic him, but it was immediately clear—there was a wide gap between their attempts and Minhø's flawless execution.

"Stop," Minhø called out abruptly, silencing the music with a click of the remote.

He turned, surveying the group with an intense stare. "That was sloppy. Again."

The dancers exchanged nervous glances, but no one dared question him. Resetting their positions, they prepared to start over. This time, Minhø didn't demonstrate but instead watched them, his eagle eye catching every minor misstep and hesitation.

"No," he interrupted again, frustration evident. He walked over to one of the trainees who had stumbled through a turn. "Your timing is off. You're overthinking it. Feel the rhythm, don't count the beats. From the top."

Sweat started to form on the foreheads of the dancers as they pushed through the rigorous training. Minhø's demanding style left no room for mistakes.

After several repetitions, Minhø finally called for a break. "Take five. We'll start the next sequence after."

The dancers sagged in relief, dispersing to catch their breath. Minhø, however, was far from finished. As he headed toward his water bottle, a staff member who had been waiting at the door approached him.

"Minhø-ssi, you're needed in Conference Room 2 at 12:30," the man said, handing Minhø a folder.

Minhø frowned as he took the papers. "Conference Room 2? Isn't that for the Global Marketing team? Why am I being called?"

"I'm not sure. Mr. Lee specifically asked for your presence," the staff member replied before excusing himself.

Minhø checked the time—12:10 p.m. He glanced at the group of dancers, realizing there was no way he could finish teaching them the next segment in just 15 minutes. Frustration built inside him, but he knew there was no choice.

"Kyunbin!" Minhø called for his assistant. "I need you to take over for the rest of the session. I've been pulled into a meeting. Make sure they get through the next sequence, and be strict with their timing."

After ensuring Kyunbin had everything under control, Minhø left the practice room, his phone buzzing as he walked toward the elevator. He glanced at the screen—two messages from Jisung, and two missed calls from his mother. Ignoring the latter, he opened Jisung's texts.

Jisung

10:43 am Hyung

10:43 am I'm visiting Felix at the company today, will you be free around 3?

Minhø typed out a quick response as the elevator doors slid shut.

Minhø

12:16 pm I have a meeting soon Sungie

12:17 pm I might be free later

Jisung

12:17 pm Okay, let me know when you are

It was a week after meeting Jisung and his friends and Minhø and Jisung had texted each other often.

Sliding the phone into his pocket, Minhø walked into the still-empty conference room where he was greeted by the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the city of Haneulwon-gu.

As he looked out over the city, Minhø's thoughts drifted back to his first arrival here—a time marked by uncertainty and overwhelming grief.

He remembered the day vividly, not as one of excitement but as a harrowing transition into an unknown future.

The memory of his father's death was still raw, 4 years later. His death had not only shattered his family but had also upended Minhø's own sense of security. Forced to leave his home and everything familiar behind, he had arrived in the city with a heavy heart and a mind full of questions.

The door to the conference room swung open, snapping Minhø out of his thoughts, and members of the various departments walked in in groups.

Minho greeted them as he took a seat. His curiosity grew when he saw the Marketing director, Ahn Hyejin and one of the Creative directors, Lee Seokmin walk in a few minutes later.

“Ah, Everyone’s here. Great. Let’s get this over quickly”, started Hyejin.

“Thank you for joining us, Minho. We need to address something urgent”, Seokmin continued, his tone serious.

Hyejin cleared her throat and looked at Minho with a sympathetic gaze. “We’ve just been informed about a significant security breach that has compromised several of our upcoming projects.”

Minho’s brow furrowed in confusion. “A security breach? What exactly happened?”

Seokmin took a deep breath before continuing. “Our IT department discovered that sensitive information related to projects in which your team is involved has been leaked. This includes detailed plans, schedules, and even some of the creative concepts we were planning to unveil. ”

Minho’s eyes widened, a mix of concern and frustration crossing his face. “How did this happen? And what’s the extent of the damage?”

“We are still investigating as to how the leak happened. Authorities have been informed and we need to discuss on how this will affect your immediate projects and how we can reduce the damage.”

As the meeting continued on how they could address the setback, Minho could feel a headache coming on. The breach not only jeopardized his upcoming projects but also placed a significant strain on his professional reputation. He felt a gnawing anxiety over the potential consequences, both for his work and for the team relying on him.

The conference room had cleared out, leaving Minho with a heavy sense of responsibility.

Chapter 6 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149309611>)

Jisung

1:50 pm Hyung, Felix canceled on me

1:52 pm Blueprint at 3?

Minho

2:45 pm I’ll be there

Minho arrived at the cozy café. The café was filled with the rich aroma of roasted beans and the soft murmur of conversations. Minho spotted Jisung already seated at a corner table, engrossed in his phone.

“Hey, Jisung!” Minho greeted as he approached the table, a faint smile appearing on his face.

Jisung looked up, his expression brightening as he saw Minho. “Hyung! You made it. I was starting to think you’d be too busy.”

Minho shook his head, slipping into the seat across from Jisung. “I wouldn’t miss this. It’s been a long morning. I needed a break.”

Placing their respective orders with the server, they settled into the conversation.

Jisung raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like you’ve had a rough day. What happened?”

Minho sighed, leaning back in his chair. “We had a meeting with the global marketing team and the creative director. There’s been a major security breach. Some of our upcoming projects were compromised.”

Jisung’s eyes widened in concern. “That sounds serious. How are you handling it?”

“It is serious. We’re still figuring out the extent of the damage and how to address it. It’s a lot to deal with, but I’m trying to stay focused”, Minho remarked

Jisung nodded sympathetically. “I can imagine how stressful that must be. If there’s anything I can do to help, just let me know.”

Minho smiled gratefully. “Thanks, Jisung. I appreciate it. I just needed a break from all the chaos, and I’m glad we could meet.”

Their server arrived with their orders, and they spent a few moments in silence as they settled into their meal. Minho took the opportunity to change the subject to something lighter.

“What happened with Felix? I thought you two had plans.”

Jisung sighed dramatically, though a smile tugged at the corners of his lips. “He canceled on me last minute. Apparently, something came up, and now I’m stuck here with only my thoughts for company.”

Minho chuckled, amused. “Well, I’m glad I could step in then. I promise I won’t let you be bored.”

As they continued their lunch, the conversation flowed effortlessly, and Minho felt a sense of contentment.

Jisung’s company provided a welcome escape from the stresses of the day. After they finished their lunch, Minho stood up, feeling more relaxed. “Thanks for this, Jisung. It was just what I needed.”

Jisung smiled warmly. “Anytime, Hyung. I’m glad I could help take your mind off things.”

Jisung

Jisung stared at his phone, the message from his aunt clear as day: *"Do not skip this dinner, Jisung. It's not a request."* He hadn't bothered with these family dinners in years, but this time, he was cornered.

With a sigh, he yanked a white shirt from his wardrobe, tossing it onto the bed. Felix, lounging nearby, looked up. "You're actually going?"

"Yeah," Jisung muttered. "My aunt isn't giving me a choice this time."

Felix frowned. "That's messed up. Why now?"

"Who knows? Probably something business-related," Jisung said, pulling out a blazer. "They'll just talk around me like always."

Felix sat up. "You don't have to do this, you know."

Jisung shook his head. "Skipping would just make things worse. I'll get through it."

Felix gave him a reassuring smile. "I'll be here after. We can hang out and forget about it."

Jisung managed a small smile. "Thanks, Lix. I'll need that."

Jisung entered the dining room, his mood already dark from the looming family dinner. His parents were seated at the table, their faces as impassive as ever. His aunt greeted him warmly as he took his seat, a small comfort in the otherwise tense atmosphere.

"Jisung, it's good to see you," she said with a soft smile. "Thank you for coming."

"Thanks, Auntie," Jisung replied, forcing a smile as he sat down. The conversation around the table was predictably dull, failing to engage him.

Midway through the meal, his father cleared his throat, signaling that he had something important to say. "We have an important announcement."

Jisung looked up, a knot forming in his stomach. "What is it?"

His mother's tone was brisk. "We've decided to move to Malaysia."

Jisung's fork clattered onto his plate. "Malaysia? Are you serious? Why now? What about everything I have here?"

His father's face was set in a determined expression. "The move is for business reasons. It's the best option for our future. We'll be relocating in two months."

Jisung's frustration boiled over.

"You're asking me to leave everything behind—my life, my studies, my friends. How can you expect me to just drop everything?"

His mother's tone was unyielding. "It's not up for discussion. We need to stick together as a family during this transition."

Jisung slammed his hand on the table. "Sticking together? You've never cared about what happens to me before. Why start now? You don't get to suddenly decide you're interested in my life!"

His aunt tried to intervene with a soothing voice. "Jisung, I understand this is a lot to take in. Sometimes these decisions are made with a long-term perspective."

Jisung's face was flushed with anger. "Long-term perspective? You've never considered my feelings or what's happening in my life! You just decide and expect me to fall in line!"

His father's gaze was stern. "This is not negotiable. We've made our decision, and we expect you to comply."

Jisung stood up abruptly, his chair scraping loudly against the floor. "You know what? I can't do this anymore!" He shot a glare at his parents. "I'm done with this!"

Without waiting for a response, Jisung stormed out of the dining room, his emotions in turmoil. The door slammed behind him, leaving the room in stunned silence.

As he walked away from the house, Jisung's anger and frustration surged within him. The thought of being uprooted and forced to leave his life behind felt unbearable. He knew he had to fight for his own path and refused to let his parents dictate his future.

Chapter 7 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149309650>)

2 weeks later

The classroom buzzed with the usual energy as students took their seats. Jisung sat down with a tired sigh, his mind weighed down by his parents' decision to move the family to Malaysia. Though he tried to focus on the lecture, his thoughts kept drifting to the disruption in his life.

When the class ended, Jisung gathered his things and headed out, hoping to find some distraction. He spotted Hyunjin leaning casually against the hallway wall, his demeanor as insufferable as ever.

“Hey, Jisung,” Hyunjin said with a smirk. “Look who decided to grace us with his presence.”

Jisung’s frustration flared. “What’s your problem, Hyunjin?”

Hyunjin shrugged, not hiding his disdain. “Just noticed you’ve been looking pretty out of it lately. Maybe if you weren’t so distracted by your personal drama, you’d actually be useful for once.”

Jisung’s anger boiled over. “Oh, so now you’re judging me for having a life outside of this place? My parents are moving us to Malaysia, and it’s a huge upheaval. I don’t need your crap on top of everything else.”

Hyunjin raised an eyebrow, unfazed. “Malaysia, huh? Sounds like you’re just making excuses for not keeping up. Everyone’s got their problems, Jisung. Maybe you should quit whining and focus on what you need to do.”

Jisung’s hands clenched into fists. “You think it’s that simple? My entire world is changing, and I’m trying to manage it while dealing with your attitude. It’s more than just keeping up with school.”

Hyunjin scoffed. “Sounds like you’re just looking for sympathy. If you can’t handle a little stress, maybe you should reconsider your priorities.”

Jisung’s frustration reached its peak. “I’m dealing with a lot right now, and the last thing I need is your judgment. Why don’t you focus on yourself for a change?”

Without waiting for a response, Jisung turned and walked away, leaving Hyunjin with a smirk that soon faded into a scowl. He pulled out his phone, considering reaching out to Minhø, but hesitated, knowing Minhø was likely busy. His last few calls to Minhø had been unanswered and texts unread.

“Hey, Jisung!” Hyunjin called, running after him.

Jisung turned, irritation flaring up again. “For fucks sake! Leave me alone Hyunjin, what do you want?”

Hyunjin’s expression was a mix of annoyance and a hint of mischief. “I’m just a messenger. Minhø told me to tell you to meet him at Blueprint at 7”

Jisung’s eyes widened slightly, his anger momentarily forgotten. “Minhø? Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

Hyunjin shrugged, his smirk widening. “I didn’t think you’d be interested, given how busy you’ve been being angry at everyone.”

Jisung clenched his jaw, fighting to keep his frustration in check. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

Looking at his watch, he saw that it was 5:30 pm, having had an afternoon lecture instead of the usual morning lectures. He could go home for a quick shower before meeting Minhø. Though he didn’t understand why Minhø had not contacted him directly.

1 hour later

As Jisung walked from his house to the café, his thoughts were preoccupied with Minhø. The cool evening air did little to clear his mind.

He took a shortcut through a quieter street, hoping to avoid the crowds. But as he rounded a corner, he noticed something unusual—two men in a dark coat and hat who seemed to be following him at a distance. They moved with a deliberate pace, trying to keep a low profile but failing to blend in.

Jisung’s heart raced as he quickened his pace, glancing back occasionally to see if they were still there. It didn’t take long for him to recognize one of the men’s face—it was someone his parents had used before for surveillance.

Fury mixed with anxiety surged through him. *They’re spying on me again?* he thought, trying to steady his breathing. The realization stung; his parents’ invasive control seemed to have no bounds.

He reached the café, his thoughts racing as he stepped inside. The warm, inviting atmosphere was a stark contrast to the unease he felt.

...

Jisung glanced up at the familiar chime of the café door, his heart pounding with a flicker of hope. But it was just another stranger walking in, not the person he had been waiting for. His body relaxed slightly, though the knot of tension in his chest remained. That was the seventh time in the past hour. He cast a quick glance at the clock above the door—30 minutes past the time they were supposed to meet.

His hands trembled as he glanced outside the café window. They were still there, sitting on the chair just outside the café, staring at him. They had been watching him for the past hour, making no effort to hide it.

Jisung tore his gaze away from them, forcing his hands to stop shaking before anyone noticed. The thought of someone asking him if he was okay filled him with dread. If they did, he might break down, and then everything would fall apart.

No. He couldn’t lose it. Not now.

He felt the burn of unshed tears pricking at his eyes, but he blinked them away quickly. He wouldn’t cry. Not here. Not where they could see.

“Hello. Would you like to order anything else?”

The voice startled him. Jisung looked up at the waitress, the same one who had served his nearly-empty Iced Americano an hour ago. He quickly glanced at the time again—7:45 pm. An hour since he'd arrived.

Where was he?

His eyes darted to his phone, the screen showing 13 missed calls and 42 unanswered messages.

"I'd like another Iced Americano, please," he mumbled, trying to buy himself a little more time. He would wait 15 more minutes. That was all.

Just as he was about to put his phone down, it rang. The sudden sound made him flinch, his pulse racing as he stared at the unknown number on the screen.

His first instinct was to ignore it. It wasn't the number he expected, and his gut twisted with unease. But then a sliver of hope crept in. What if it was him?

He hesitated for only a moment before answering.

"H-Hello?" His voice was shaky.

"Sungie..." came the voice from the other end.

Jisung's heart skipped a beat. "H-Hyung? Where are you? Are you okay? You're late! Do you have any idea how many times I've called you? I've been waiting for over an hour! What happened? And whose number is this?" His words tumbled out in a rush, every ounce of his worry spilling over.

"Jisung... I'm sorry. I'm at Cheonghwa-gu Police Station," came the reply, the voice weak, hesitant.

Jisung felt his stomach drop. "Police station? Hyung, what happened? Are you okay?"

"I... I don't know. Something happened, and I need your help. I didn't know who else to call," the voice on the other end faltered, as if struggling to keep it together.

Jisung was already on his feet, bolting out of the café door. He pulled up the map on his phone, his fingers moving rapidly across the screen. Cheonghwa-gu Police Station. It was nearly an hour's drive away from Haneulwon-gu, but if he sped, he could make it in 45 minutes.

"I'm coming, hyung. I'm on my way. Hang in there," Jisung promised, his voice tight as he hurried to his car, heart pounding in his chest.

Chapter 8 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149378485>)

Minho

Minho walked through the bustling city streets, his mind heavy with the recent stressors. It had been a challenging two weeks. His phone had gone missing yesterday, and the lack of communication had left him feeling disconnected, especially from Jisung. He had been reflecting on how much he missed their conversations and wished they could have spent more time together.

As Minho approached the office, he spotted Hyunjin walking towards him. He quickened his pace, hoping to catch up with him for a brief moment of normalcy.

"Hyunjin!" Minho called out, waving to get his attention.

Hyunjin looked up from his phone, surprised to see Minho. "Minho! Didn't expect to see you. How's it going?"

"It's been a tough few days," Minho admitted, trying to sound casual despite the anxiety gnawing at him. "My phone went missing yesterday, and I've been out of touch. Could you do me a favor?"

"Sure thing," Hyunjin replied, his curiosity piqued. "What's up?"

"I need you to tell Jisung I'm meeting him at the café this evening," Minho said, his frustration evident. "I haven't been able to reach him myself."

"Got it," Hyunjin said, nodding. "I'll make sure he knows. You should get your phone sorted out soon."

"Thanks, Hyunjin. I really appreciate it," Minho said, feeling a small sense of relief.

They exchanged quick goodbyes, and Minho continued on to work. The day was filled with rehearsals and choreography adjustments, but his mind was preoccupied with the missing phone the ongoing security breach at Miroh Music. The company had been tight-lipped about it, and despite his efforts to stay informed, there had been no progress. The breach had compromised several upcoming projects, and Minho was increasingly concerned about the potential fallout.

As he was finishing up a rehearsal, his colleague Kwon Soonyoung, another lead choreographer, approached him. Soonyoung was known for his carefree attitude and relaxed demeanor.

"Hey, Minho!" Soonyoung greeted with a wide grin. "You look like you've got a lot on your plate. Everything alright?"

"Hey, Soonyoung," Minho replied, forcing a smile. "Yeah, it's been a rough couple of days. My phone went missing, and I've been trying to catch up."

“That sucks, man,” Soonyoung said sympathetically. “Phones are a lifeline these days. If you need any help or just want to vent, I’m around.”

“Thanks, Soonyoung,” Minho said, appreciating the support. “I might take you up on that.”

As the evening approached, Minho was wrapping up his work when Kyunbin, his assistant, came into his office.

“Minho, the director needs to see you in his office right away,” Kyunbin said, his tone businesslike.

Minho looked up, a frown forming on his face. “What’s this about? I’ve got a lot to wrap up here.”

“I don’t know the details,” Kyunbin replied, “but it sounds urgent. You should head over now.”

Minho’s heart raced as he made his way to the director’s office.

He couldn’t shake a sense of foreboding. Something felt off—an eerie feeling that everything was converging towards this moment. His missing phone, the unresolved breach, and the unsettling sense of something being just out of reach were all starting to form a troubling picture in his mind. He couldn’t help but think that these seemingly unrelated problems might be interconnected in a way he couldn’t yet comprehend.

When he arrived, he was greeted by the director, Hyejin, and a group of serious-looking individuals who introduced themselves as detectives from Cheonghwa-gu, a district far from Minho’s residence.

One of the detectives, a middle-aged man with a stern expression, stepped forward. “Minho Lee, we need to speak with you regarding a high-profile investigation. We have evidence suggesting you might have information relevant to a murder case that occurred earlier today.”

Minho’s confusion deepened. “What? I don’t understand. How does this involve me?”

“We’re not accusing you of anything,” the detective said. “We need your cooperation. You have the right to remain silent and consult a lawyer if you wish.”

Minho’s mind raced. A sudden investigation?

As Minho was led out of the office by the detectives, his thoughts were filled with mounting anxiety. He couldn’t shake the feeling of dread. His thoughts were a jumble of anxiety and confusion as he tried to piece together how all these threads might be connected.

Felix wiped the sweat from his brow, feeling the satisfying ache in his muscles after an intense training session. He was about to head to the locker room when he caught a snippet of conversation that made him freeze.

“...Minho’s at the police station,” someone whispered, just loud enough for Felix to hear.

Felix’s heart skipped a beat. Minho? The police station? That didn’t make sense. Minho was the most focused person he knew, always wrapped up in work, always on top of things. What could have possibly happened?

Felix slowed his pace, his ears straining to pick up more of the conversation without drawing attention to himself.

“Do they know why he’s there?” one of the trainees asked, their voice tinged with curiosity.

“No idea,” another replied. “But people are saying he was called in for something serious. I overheard someone mention it to one of the managers.”

Felix’s mind started to race. Serious? What could be serious enough to involve the police? The thought of Minho being in trouble unsettled him deeply. He needed to know more, but he also knew he couldn’t just walk up and start asking questions without drawing attention.

Felix quickly gathered his things and headed out of the building. Once outside, he pulled out his phone, hesitating for a moment before sending a text to Jisung. If anyone knew what was going on, it would be him.

Jisung

8:12 pm Jisung, just heard Minho’s at the police station. Is everything okay?

He hit send and stared at his phone, hoping for a quick reply, but nothing came. The silence only made him more anxious. Felix’s mind jumped to the last time he had seen Minho, remembering how he had seemed a bit distracted, but nothing out of the ordinary.

As he stood there, a sense of unease settled in his stomach. Felix took a deep breath, trying to keep his thoughts from spiraling. He decided to wait a few more minutes for a response, but if he didn’t hear back soon, he might have to head over to Jisung’s place himself to find out what was really going on.

“Come on, Jisung, just reply...” Felix muttered under his breath, staring at his phone, hoping for some sort of explanation that would make this all make sense.

Minho sat in the cold, sterile interrogation room, the tension palpable in the air. His hands fidgeted slightly in his lap, but his expression remained calm. He knew better than to show any signs of nervousness, even though his mind was a whirlwind of thoughts. How had things escalated to this point? He hadn’t done anything wrong.

The door creaked open, and two detectives walked in, their faces stern and unreadable. One of them, Detective Kim, sat down across from him, sliding a file onto the table with deliberate slowness. The other, Detective Choi, leaned against

the wall, arms crossed, silently observing.

“Mr. Lee Minhoo,” Detective Kim began, his voice even and professional, “I assume you know why you’re here?” Minhoo clenched his jaw. “No, I don’t, actually. I haven’t been told anything.”

Detective Kim gave him a long, hard look before opening the file. “You’re a suspect in an ongoing murder investigation. The victim was found early this morning, and we’ve gathered evidence that ties you to the crime scene.”

Minhoo blinked, disbelief settling over him like a thick fog. Murder? This couldn’t be real. “A murder? I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’ve been working nonstop the past few weeks—I don’t even know who the victim is.”

Without missing a beat, Detective Choi uncrossed his arms and stepped forward, placing a photo on the table. The image was of a man Minhoo vaguely recognized—a music executive who had been in and out of Miroh Music’s offices over the past few months.

Minhoo’s brow furrowed as he stared at the photo. “I’ve seen him around... but I don’t know him personally.”

“That’s not the issue,” Detective Kim said, his voice growing more direct. “We have security footage that places you near the scene of the crime in Cheonghwa-gu last night.”

Minhoo’s stomach dropped. *Cheonghwa-gu?* That didn’t make sense. He hadn’t been anywhere near that area—he was sure of it. “That’s impossible. I was at home.”

Detective Kim slid another piece of evidence across the table: a grainy still from the footage, showing a figure that, disturbingly, resembled Minhoo. Same build, same posture. Minhoo’s heart pounded in his chest as he scrutinized the image.

“I didn’t go to Cheonghwa-gu,” Minhoo insisted, his voice tightening. “I lost my phone yesterday. I don’t know who this is, but it’s not me.”

Detective Kim’s gaze didn’t waver. “Then explain this,” he said, pulling out a small plastic evidence bag. Inside was a familiar object—Minhoo’s phone.

Minhoo’s breath hitched. *How...?*

“It was found near the crime scene,” Detective Choi added, his tone almost accusatory. “Care to explain how your phone got there?”

Minhoo’s mind raced. He hadn’t seen his phone since the day before, but to find it near the scene of a murder? That was beyond coincidence. “I told you, I lost my phone. Someone must have taken it.”

Detective Kim leaned back in his chair, observing Minhoo closely. “That’s quite a coincidence, don’t you think? Losing your phone the day before a murder, and then it ends up at the crime scene?”

Minhoo was reeling. He felt like he was sinking deeper into quicksand with each passing moment, the evidence piling up against him, but none of it made sense. How could his phone be there? Who would do this?

“I don’t know how it got there,” Minhoo said quietly, his hands curling into fists under the table. “But I didn’t do anything.”

The detectives exchanged a glance, neither looking particularly convinced.

“We’ll be investigating further,” Detective Kim said, standing up. “But for now, we suggest you find a good lawyer.”

The moment the detectives left, the silence in the room became deafening. He ran a hand through his hair, trying to keep his composure. He knew he needed a lawyer, but the reality hit him hard—he didn’t have one. He wasn’t the kind of person who kept a lawyer on speed dial; his life had never required it.

His thoughts raced as he tried to think of who he could call. A few acquaintances from the industry came to mind, but none he trusted with something this serious. He needed someone who knew him, who believed in him.

And then it hit him—Jisung.

Minhoo’s chest tightened at the thought. Jisung wasn’t a lawyer, but he was someone who might be able to help, or at the very least, be there for him when he needed it most. With shaky hands, he pressed the call button on the room’s phone, the dial tone loud in the otherwise quiet room.

When the operator picked up, Minhoo’s voice was strained. “I need to make a call... It’s not for a lawyer. Just... I need to call someone.”

The operator hesitated before complying, connecting him to the outside line. Minhoo quickly punched in Jisung’s number, praying that he would pick up. The phone rang once, twice, and then—

“Hello?”

Minhoo let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “Sungie...,” he said, his voice betraying the turmoil he was feeling.

Chapter 9 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149379046>)

Jisung arrived at his apartment out of breath, fumbling with his keys as he unlocked the door and dashed inside. Grabbing his car keys from the kitchen counter, he didn’t even pause to catch his breath before he was back out the door,

practically flying down the stairs.

His car roared to life, and he sped out of the parking lot, the tires screeching as he took a sharp turn onto the main road. The streets blurred past him as he made his way to the Cheonghwa-gu police station, the knot in his stomach tightening with every passing second.

As he drove, his phone buzzed, and he glanced at it briefly to see a message from Felix.

Felix

8:12 pm Jisung, just heard Minho's at the police station. Is everything okay?

When he finally pulled up to the police station, he barely took the time to park properly, jumping out of the car and slamming the door behind him. The station's harsh fluorescent lights greeted him as he burst through the doors, his heart pounding in his chest.

"I'm here for Lee Minho," he said, almost out of breath, as he reached the front desk. His voice was urgent, almost frantic. "Please, I need to see him."

The officer behind the desk looked up slowly, taking in Jisung's disheveled appearance with a raised eyebrow. "And you are?"

"Han Jisung," he replied, trying to keep his voice steady despite the panic bubbling beneath the surface. "He's... he's my friend. Please, tell me he's here."

The officer's expression softened slightly as he typed something into the computer. After a moment, he looked back up at Jisung, his face unreadable.

"He's already been questioned," the officer said finally, "but he's still here. Just wait a moment."

Jisung's heart pounded even harder as he waited, the seconds feeling like hours. What could have happened to Minho? Why was he even at the police station in the first place?

Finally, a police officer approached him. "Mr. Han, you can meet with Minho now."

Jisung's heart raced as he followed the officer down a narrow hallway. The fluorescent lights flickered overhead, casting a cold, clinical light. They stopped at a door marked "Interrogation Room 2."

The officer opened the door, revealing Minho seated at a metal table, looking exhausted and frightened. Minho's eyes widened with a mixture of relief and anxiety when he saw Jisung.

"Minho Hyung!" Jisung exclaimed as he rushed to the table, taking the seat across from him. "What's going on? Why are you here?"

Minho's hands were shaking as he met Jisung's worried gaze. "Jisung, this is a mess. They've got me in here because of a murder investigation. My phone was found near the crime scene."

Jisung's eyes went wide. "Murder? Your phone? How did it end up there?"

Minho swallowed hard, his voice trembling. "It's been missing since yesterday. I thought it was stolen. But now they tell me it was found at the scene of a murder. I don't understand how it could have ended up there."

Jisung's heart sank. "That's awful. Do they have any other evidence against you?"

Minho nodded, his face pale. "They've shown me a still from a CCTV footage. It's grainy and unclear, but they claim it's me. They haven't even shown me the full footage, just a still."

Jisung's brow furrowed. "So, they're accusing you based on this footage?"

Minho nodded, looking distressed. "Yes. They haven't given me any concrete answers, just the footage and my phone found at the scene."

Jisung squeezed Minho's hand reassuringly. "We'll get through this. We need to see the full footage and find out who's behind this. You're not alone in this."

The door opened, and the two detectives from earlier re-entered the room, their expressions serious but controlled.

"Mr. Lee," one of the detectives began, addressing Minho, "We've reviewed the evidence and spoken to the relevant witnesses. We're going to release you for now, but this investigation is ongoing."

Minho's face showed a mix of relief and anxiety. "So, I'm not being arrested?"

The detective shook his head. "Not at this time. However, we need you to stay available for further questioning. Your phone was found near the crime scene, which is why we brought you in."

Minho's brow furrowed. "But I never went to Cheonghwa-gu. I'm based in Hanuelwon-gu and haven't been anywhere near there."

The detective nodded. "We understand. However, we need to investigate why your phone was found at the scene. You're free to go for now, but you must remain reachable for any follow-up questions."

The second detective pulled out a notepad. "How can we contact you if needed?"

Minho hesitated, then said, "You can reach me through Jisung.", throwing an apologizing look at Jisung for drawing him into this.

Jisung, taken slightly aback but quick to respond, offered his phone number to the detective. "You can reach me anytime. I'll make sure Minho gets any messages."

The detective noted down the information. "Alright. We'll be in touch if we need anything further."

"Come on, let's get you home.", Jisung stood up, holding his hand out to Minho.

Minho stared at Jisung's outstretched hand for a moment, then grasped it tightly. The simple gesture provided him with a sense of reassurance, grounding him amidst the chaos.

The car's engine purred softly as they drove through the dimly lit streets, the city slowly winding down for the night. Jisung kept his eyes on the road, his hands gripping the steering wheel a little tighter than usual. The silence between them was thick, almost suffocating, but neither of them seemed ready to break it.

Minho stared out the window, the neon lights of passing storefronts casting fleeting glows across his face.

Jisung glanced over at Minho every now and then, wanting to say something, anything that might ease the worry etched into Minho's features. But he couldn't find the right words. What could he possibly say that would make any of this better?

Instead, he focused on the rhythm of the road, the way the streetlights passed by in a steady, hypnotic pattern. It was easier than confronting the fear gnawing at him, the uncertainty about what would happen next. The silence between them wasn't just the absence of words; it was the unspoken fear that this situation might spiral out of their control.

When they finally reached Minho's building, Jisung pulled the car to a stop. The quiet hum of the engine ceased, leaving only the heavy silence between them.

"I'll walk you up," Jisung offered, his voice softer now, filled with concern.

Minho shook his head. "You don't have to. I'll be okay."

But Jisung was already getting out of the car, his determination unwavering. Minho managed a small, grateful smile as he followed suit, the two of them heading up to the apartment together, the silence between them now filled with unspoken support and understanding.

Minho fumbled with his keys, his hands trembling slightly as they stood outside his apartment door. Jisung noticed the shake in Minho's fingers but didn't comment, allowing him the space to process everything. After a few moments, the lock clicked, and Minho pushed the door open, revealing his home.

Jisung stepped inside cautiously, taking in his surroundings. It was his first time in Minho's apartment, and the space was exactly as he imagined it—neat, minimal, and with a certain warmth that reflected Minho's personality.

The living room was modest and comfortable, with a grey couch facing a large television mounted on the wall. The hardwood floors were spotless, and a small dining table sat tucked into a corner by the kitchen, which opened seamlessly into the living area. The room had an understated elegance, bathed in the soft glow of the city lights streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows.

As soon as the door closed, two orange cats, Soonie and Doongi, bounded up to him, meowing eagerly. Minho crouched down, gently petting both before a grey cat, Dori, cautiously approached.

"Hey, you three," Minho said softly, giving Dori a scratch behind the ear. The cats seemed to calm Minho a bit, and Jisung watched as Minho's tense expression soften.

Jisung had heard about the cats before but was seeing them for the first time. It was a strange contrast to the serious conversation they had just left behind at the police station.

Minho straightened up and turned to Jisung, who was still standing by the door. The vulnerability in Minho's eyes was palpable, and when he spoke, his voice was soft, almost hesitant.

"Jisung... Can you stay? Just for tonight?"

Jisung blinked, slightly taken aback by the request. He had expected Minho to want some space, but the look in Minho's eyes told him otherwise.

"Of course," Jisung replied without hesitation. "I'll stay."

Minho nodded, relief evident on his face. He moved back to the couch, sitting down beside the first cat, who immediately climbed into his lap. Jisung joined him, the atmosphere in the room easing slightly.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Jisung offered gently. "But I'm here if you need to."

Minho looked at him, a small, grateful smile tugging at his lips. "Thank you, Jisung. I just... I don't want to be alone right now."

"You're not alone," Jisung assured him, reaching out to place a comforting hand on Minho's shoulder. "I'm here."

Minho leaned slightly into the touch, drawing comfort from Jisung's presence. The weight of the day's events seemed to lift, if only for a moment.

"Stay the night," Minho said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper. "Please."

Jisung nodded, his hand still resting on Minho's shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere."

As the night stretched on, they sat together in the quiet of the apartment, surrounded by the peaceful presence of Minho's cats.

Chapter 10 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149379766>)

Jisung jolted awake on the couch, disoriented by the constant vibrating of his phone on the coffee table. The warmth of Minho beside him was a stark contrast to the jarring buzz of the device. He blinked blearily, realizing they must have fallen asleep on the couch last night.

Groggily, Jisung reached for the phone, his hand brushing against the cool surface of the coffee table. The screen lit up with a flurry of notifications: messages from his mother, Felix, and Innies, alongside several missed calls. As he swiped through the messages, he felt a twinge of anxiety. The missed calls only added to the mounting tension, making Jisung's heart race as he tried to understand what was happening.

A sudden realization hit him, making him alert instantly. His heart sank as he remembered his parents' spies—the ones who had undoubtedly seen him at the police station and witnessed everything that had happened since. Panic surged through him as he pieced together the likely scenario: his parents would have already been informed about the incident and, more alarmingly, about his late-night visit to Minho's apartment.

Cursing, he opened Felix's and Innies's messages in their group chat.

Felix

10:47 pm Jisung, where the hell are you? I've been trying to reach you all night. Call me NOW!

Innie

11:03 pm Hey, I heard some insane shit from my colleagues.

11:04 pm Is Minho really tangled up in this murder investigation? What the actual fuck?

Felix

11:04 pm Murder!?! What the fuck?

11:05 pm Hyunjin told me Minho was supposed to meet you. I went to your place, but it was fucking empty. Where the hell are you?

12:16 am I've been looking at the news. They're saying Minho is a suspect in a murder case. Please, what's happening?

Jisung's heart raced as he read through the panicked messages. He hadn't realized how late it was or how much his friends had been worrying. He quickly typed out a response, trying to catch up.

Felix & Innies

7:12 am Shit, sorry, guys. I was out of it and missed all these messages.

7:13 am I'm with Minho right now. He's in some deep trouble, but I'm on it. I'll update you soon.

He felt Minho shift beside him and turned his gaze to see Minho slowly waking up. Minho's face was scrunched up in concern, and Jisung could see the weight of worry etched into his features even in the soft morning light. As Minho shifted, Jisung could see him trying to shake off the remnants of sleep and the stress that had plagued him for the past days. Minho's movements were slow, and he seemed lost in thought, his gaze distant.

Jisung decided to break the silence, sensing that Minho needed some comfort. He gently touched Minho's shoulder. "Hey," he said softly, "good morning."

Minho turned his head towards Jisung, his eyes meeting Jisung's with a tired but grateful expression.

Jisung got up from the couch, stretching his limbs, and walked over to the kitchenette. He started to prepare some coffee, hoping it would offer Minho a small respite from the anxiety that had been clouding his days.

As the coffee brewed, Jisung looked over at Minho, who was now sitting up on the couch, rubbing his eyes and trying to gather his thoughts. Jisung's heart ached seeing him like this, but he knew that staying strong and supportive was what Minho needed most right now.

Minho finally approached the kitchen, his steps hesitant but determined. He offered a small, appreciative smile as he took in the sight of Jisung making coffee. "Thanks," he said quietly.

"No problem," Jisung replied, trying to offer a reassuring smile.

As they sipped their coffee in the quiet of the morning, the weight of the situation pressed heavily on both Minho and Jisung. Minho's gaze was fixed on his coffee cup, but his mind was miles away, racing through the implications of everything that had happened.

"Jisung," Minho said, breaking the silence, his voice low and troubled. "I can't stop thinking about what's happening outside this apartment. My name is probably all over the news by now."

Jisung looked at him, his brow furrowing in concern.

"I'm really dreading going to work today," Minho admitted, his voice tight with anxiety.

"Do you wanna come with me to my recording? It might be a good distraction for you. Changbin will be the only one there and he's working with me on some new stuff. You could come along if you want."

Minho looked up, clearly unsure. "I don't know Changbin. I mean, if it's something you're working on, I wouldn't want to intrude or anything."

Jisung shook his head with a reassuring smile. "It's not an intrusion at all. Changbin's a great guy, and I think you'd find it relaxing to just hang out and take your mind off things. Plus, it could be a good change of pace for you."

Minho hesitated, still feeling uneasy about leaving the house. "I guess it could be nice to get out of here for a bit. I'm just worried about how it might look if I'm not at the office."

Jisung placed a hand on Minho's shoulder, offering a supportive gesture. "Look, it's just a recording session. No one's going to be looking for you there, and you'll be with me. It's a chance to step away from all the stress for a while. Changbin's pretty laid-back and wouldn't mind having some extra company."

Minho took a deep breath, appreciating Jisung's encouragement. "Alright, you're right. Maybe a change of scenery would help. I'll come with you to the studio and try to take my mind off things."

Jisung's face lit up with relief. "Awesome. I'm sure he will be happy to see you, and it'll be good to get out of the house. We'll make a day of it and focus on something positive."

As they finished their coffee, Minho glanced at Jisung, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

"You know, if you're thinking about going home to change, you don't have to. I've got some clothes you can borrow."

Jisung looked up, surprised. "Really? That's very kind of you, hyung."

"No trouble at all," Minho replied, a bit more upbeat. "It'll save you a trip. Also, if you need a toothbrush or anything, feel free to grab one from the bathroom"

Jisung nodded gratefully. "Alright, if you're sure."

Minho led Jisung to his bedroom and pulled open the closet, picking out a comfortable sweater and some joggers. He handed them to Jisung with a smile. "Here, these should fit you."

"Thanks, Hyung"

As Jisung changed, Minho decided to freshen up himself. He took a quick shower and emerged in casual jeans and a well-fitted t-shirt, looking more put-together and relaxed.

When Jisung came out of the bedroom, dressed in Minho's clothes, he looked comfortable. Minho's mood brightened noticeably. "You look great," Minho said with a genuine smile.

Jisung chuckled softly. "Glad to hear that! And thanks for the toothbrush offer too. I think I'll take you up on that."

Minho guided Jisung to the bathroom, where he handed him a new toothbrush. "Here you go. I'm glad you're making yourself at home."

Jisung took the toothbrush and gave Minho a warm smile.

Emerging from the bathroom, Jisung asked, "Wanna grab some breakfast on the way?"

"Sure let's go."

Jisung and Minho stepped out of Minho's apartment, the morning air crisp and fresh against their faces. Minho locked the door behind them with a click, his mood noticeably lighter than it had been earlier. Jisung, glancing at Minho, noted the subtle change and smiled.

"Alright, what do you feel like eating?" Jisung asked, stretching his arms as they walked towards the parking lot.

Minho shrugged, his expression thoughtful. "I know a couple of good spots nearby."

"Sounds great," Jisung replied, his tone upbeat. "I'm craving something sweet. How about we go somewhere that does pancakes or waffles?"

Minho chuckled. "You know I'm all in for waffles. Pancakes are just too... flat."

Jisung laughed, nudging Minho playfully. "We'll see about that."

They got into Jisung's car, Minho sliding into the passenger seat while Jisung took the wheel. The drive to the café was filled with light-hearted banter, Minho's mood visibly improving with each passing mile. They arrived at a charming little café known for its breakfast options.

As they entered, the cozy atmosphere and the scent of freshly brewed coffee greeted them. They found a table by the window and settled in. Jisung was about to make a point about how pancakes were superior when his phone buzzed. Jisung glanced at the screen, it was a message from his aunt. He put the phone away, focusing on Minho.

Their conversation was momentarily interrupted when a group of people at the next table started whispering loudly. Minho caught snippets of their conversation about a big scandal involving someone from Miroh Music. His smile slowly faded, and he felt a wave of unease wash over him.

"Did you hear?" one of the patrons said, "There's this big scandal, and one of the choreographers from Miroh Music is a suspect in a murder case."

Another added, "Yeah, it's all over the news. I think the guy's name is Minho."

Minho's heart sank. He tried to focus on Jisung, who was now looking at him with concern.

"Hey, do you want to get out of here?" Jisung asked softly. "We can go somewhere else."

Minho shook his head, trying to put on a brave face. "No, it's fine. Let's just finish up and head out. It's something I'll have to face sooner or later."

Jisung nodded, and they finished their breakfast in a subdued mood. The cheerful café atmosphere felt overshadowed by the dark cloud of Minho's predicament.

Jisung and Minho arrived at Changbin's studio, the early morning light filtering through the tall windows. As they entered, the low hum of electronic music and the soft clinks of studio equipment filled the air. Changbin was busy setting up some gear when he noticed them walk in.

Changbin glanced up, his expression a mix of surprise and mild annoyance. "Jisung, what's the deal? You know I don't usually appreciate unexpected drop-ins, especially this early."

Jisung raised an eyebrow, trying to mask his grin. "Come on, Changbin. I thought I'd switch things up a bit. Besides, I've got someone I want you to meet."

Changbin's gaze shifted to Minho, who followed Jisung with a relaxed but slightly worn look. "And who might this be?"

Jisung stepped forward with a friendly grin. "This is Minho. He's the choreographer I've mentioned before. Hyung, meet Changbin aka SpearB. He's the genius behind J.One"

Changbin's annoyance melted into mild surprise as he shook Minho's hand. "Oh, so you're the famous choreographer Jisung's been talking about. Nice to meet you, Minho."

Minho returned the handshake with a polite smile. "Nice to meet you too, Changbin. I'm just here to tag along. Jisung thought it'd be good for me to see how you work."

Changbin's expression softened slightly, though he still looked a bit put out. "Alright, well, since you're here, I guess you can hang out. But remember, Jisung, next time, maybe give me a heads-up?"

Jisung chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Fair enough. I didn't mean to surprise you. I just thought a bit of a change might be good for Minho. He's been having a rough time."

Changbin's demeanor shifted to one of understanding as he glanced at Minho. "Got it. Welcome to the studio, Minho. Let's get started, and hopefully, this'll be a good distraction for you."

As Changbin led Jisung and Minho to the recording area, Minho took a seat on the nearby couch, trying to settle into the studio's creative energy. The atmosphere was a welcome change.

Jisung stood in the center of Changbin's studio, surrounded by dim lighting and the soft hum of the equipment. Changbin, focused and intent, adjusted the settings on the mixing console.

"Ready to record?" Changbin asked, glancing up with a nod.

"Yeah," Jisung replied, taking a deep breath. "Let's do this."

As the track began, Jisung's voice filled the studio, his delivery raw and emotional. The melancholic melody painted a picture of isolation and longing:

"Lost in a crowd, but I'm all alone,

In a world that's not my own,

I'm an alien, drifting through the unknown..."

Minho, watching from the sidelines, was visibly moved. He leaned back onto the couch, reflecting on the song's lyrics. The sense of alienation expressed in the song seemed to resonate deeply with his own feelings of disconnection amidst the chaos of recent events.

After a few takes, Changbin gave a satisfied nod. "That was powerful. You really brought the song to life."

Jisung, wiping his forehead, approached Minho. "How was that?"

Minho managed a small, appreciative smile. "It sounded incredible. It's just... it hit me in a way I wasn't expecting."

Jisung raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

Minho sighed, struggling to put his thoughts into words. "The song's about feeling like an outsider, and lately, I've been feeling exactly like that. Like everything I knew is slipping away, and I'm just trying to keep up."

Jisung nodded sympathetically. "I understand. It's tough when everything feels out of control."

Their conversation was interrupted by a buzz from Jisung's phone. He glanced at the screen and saw a new message from an unknown number. The message read:

11:40 pm I have information that could link Han Holdings to the murder investigation. Meet me at the usual place if you want to know more.

Jisung's heart raced as he read the message. The mention of Han Holdings and the connection to the murder investigation was alarming. He quickly glanced around the studio, making sure no one was watching.

He pocketed his phone, not mentioning the message to Minhoo or Changbin. The weight of the information felt heavy on his shoulders. He knew he had to find out more but didn't want to worry Minhoo with unverified details.

The atmosphere in the studio was a mix of relief and camaraderie as they finished the recording session. Changbin was busy with his equipment, and Jisung took the opportunity to quickly reply to the mysterious message, arranging to meet the unknown source later.

As they prepared to leave the studio, Jisung's mind was preoccupied with the new information he had received, but he kept his concerns hidden.

With a final glance at Minhoo, Jisung made a mental note to follow up on the message, knowing that the answers might provide crucial insights into the tangled web of the murder investigation and its links to Han Holdings.

Chapter 11 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149431909>)

Later that day, Jisung left the studio with a casual wave, promising to bring back food. But as he stepped out into the cool evening air, a familiar tension settled into his chest. He glanced down at his phone, the message he'd received earlier replaying in his mind: *"Meet me at the usual place if you want to know more"*

The "usual place" was an alley a few blocks away, a secluded spot that had seen more than its fair share of secretive meetings. Jisung's heart pounded as he made his way there, trying to push aside the thoughts of Minhoo and the mounting pressures at home.

As he walked, his thoughts drifted back to the first time he'd met the mysterious figure. He still had no idea who they were or how they always managed to find him when he needed help the most. They had appeared out of nowhere during one of the most difficult times in his life, offering information that had saved him more than once. Despite the anonymity, they had never failed him.

But they knew who he was—the Hidden Heir, the one everyone expected to live up to the family name. It was unsettling, yet there was an unspoken understanding between them. Jisung could trust the information they provided, but there was always a cost.

When he arrived at the alley, the figure was already there, shrouded in shadows as usual. Jisung's footsteps echoed against the walls, and the figure turned slightly, acknowledging his presence.

"Han Jisung," the figure greeted, their voice as familiar as it was unnerving.

"You have something for me?" Jisung asked, cutting straight to the point. He didn't have the patience for games today.

The figure didn't respond right away. Instead, they reached into their coat and pulled out a small, plain envelope, holding it out to Jisung. "Inside is the information you need about Han Holdings and its possible connection to the murder investigation."

Jisung took the envelope, feeling the cold weight of it in his hand. "What do you want in return?" His voice was steady, but he couldn't help the tension that tightened his chest.

The figure paused before answering, their tone even. "I want access to the family archives. There's something buried deep in the Han records that we need. You get us that, and we'll keep the information flowing."

Jisung's heart skipped a beat. The Han family archives were sacred, filled with secrets and history that were closely guarded. Giving someone access to those was akin to betraying his own bloodline. "The archives? You're asking for a lot."

"It's a fair trade," the figure replied smoothly. "Especially for someone who wants to keep their friend out of trouble and their family's name clean."

Jisung weighed his options, his mind racing. The Han archives were vast, filled with documents and records that spanned generations. There was no telling what this figure was after, but the implications were serious.

"You're asking me to betray my family," Jisung said, his voice laced with a mix of fear and defiance. The fact that he had no love lost for his family was secondary.

The figure tilted their head slightly. "I'm asking you to make a choice. Your family or the truth? Minhoo's life could be on the line, and you know it."

Jisung clenched his jaw, the decision tearing at him. He knew this wasn't just about protecting Minhoo or his family's reputation—this was about making sure the right thing was done, even if it meant crossing a line he never thought he would.

After a long pause, Jisung finally nodded, slipping the envelope into his pocket. "Fine. But this is the last time."

The figure gave a small, almost imperceptible nod. "We'll be in touch."

Without another word, they turned and walked away, leaving Jisung alone in the alley.

The afternoon light streamed through the city as Jisung briskly walked back to Changbin's studio, his thoughts clouded with worry. He had just grabbed lunch for himself, Minhø, and Changbin from a nearby café, but the real weight he carried was the envelope and the USB drive it contained.

The vague yet unsettling hint from his informant about a possible connection between Han Holdings and the murder scandal gnawed at him. Jisung couldn't help but fret about the implications. What if Han Holdings was involved, and this was all part of a larger scheme? The thought that his family's company could be linked to Minhø's troubles made him anxious.

The envelope felt heavy in his bag, each step amplifying his unease. He remembered the mysterious informant from his past encounters—how they had always been reliable with their information, but their true motives remained shrouded in secrecy. They were aware of Jisung's position within Han Holdings, which only added to the complexity of the situation.

As he approached the studio, Jisung's mind was a whirlwind of potential scenarios. If Han Holdings had any involvement in Minhø's predicament, it could mean much more than just a personal issue.

He entered the studio with a forced smile, trying to mask his anxiety. Minhø and Changbin were chatting as he walked in, and the smell of the food provided a temporary distraction. Jisung set the lunch down on a nearby table.

As they began to eat, Jisung's mind was far from the pleasant conversation and casual banter. He felt a sense of urgency to address the information in the envelope but knew he needed to handle it carefully. For now, he focused on being present for Minhø and Changbin, but the unease in his chest remained, a constant reminder of the dangerous crossroads he was facing.

Minhø's attempts at normalcy were faltering. He glanced at Jisung and Changbin, trying to focus on their conversation but failing. He knew he needed to do something to regain control, but the pressure was overwhelming. He cleared his throat, drawing their attention.

"Hey, I need to step out for a bit," Minhø said, his voice steady but his eyes betraying his worry. "I'm going to buy a new phone. It's been a bit crazy, and I need to get back in touch with everyone."

Jisung frowned slightly, sensing the strain in Minhø's tone. "Are you okay? Do you need any help? A ride?"

Minhø forced a smile. "No, it's fine. The weather's good outside, I'll walk home. I'll also swing by the company later to talk to my boss about everything that's going on. I should be able to contact you later once I've got things sorted."

He picked up his jacket that he had grabbed at the last minute before leaving home and slung it over his shoulder, trying to appear nonchalant but unable to hide the tension in his movements. "Thanks for everything today. I'll catch up with you later."

As he made his way out of the studio, Minhø's mind raced with thoughts of how to tackle his mounting issues. He knew he had to act quickly—he needed a new phone to communicate, and he had to face his boss about the company's stance on the scandal.

Jisung watched Minhø leave, a mix of concern and curiosity on his face. He glanced at Changbin, who was equally puzzled by the sudden departure. "Do you think he's okay?"

Changbin shrugged, his demeanor laid-back but his eyes reflecting concern.

As Minhø stepped out into the bustling city, he took a deep breath, steeling himself for the challenges ahead. The weight of his situation was immense, but he was determined to navigate through the storm, no matter how overwhelming it seemed.

Cheonghwa-gu Police Station - Detective Bureau, late afternoon.

Detectives Choi Seungcheol and Kim Youngdae were deeply engrossed in reviewing the witness statements, their attention fixed on the documents spread out before them. The room was quiet, save for the occasional rustle of papers and the tapping of keyboards.

Choi tapped a finger on a statement. "There's something not right here. This witness's account doesn't align with the CCTV footage we reviewed."

Kim squinted at the paperwork. "I see it too. We should re-interview this witness and see if we can clear up these inconsistencies. They might have more to tell us or there might be a mistake."

As they discussed their next steps, Chief Kim Yubin entered the room. Her presence was immediately commanding, and both detectives straightened up in their chairs.

"Detectives," Yubin said, her voice authoritative but controlled. "I've been briefed on the current status of the case."

Choi and Kim rose to their feet. "Chief, we've identified some discrepancies in the witness statements and were planning to address them by re-interviewing the witness."

Yubin gave a thoughtful nod. "I see. But considering the high-profile nature of this case and the media scrutiny, we need to take decisive action."

Kim's expression showed concern. "Chief, it's only been a day since the murder. If we move forward with an arrest now, we might overlook critical details that could prove Minho's innocence."

Yubin's tone was calm but firm. "I understand your concerns. However, it's crucial that we manage the case's public perception and avoid further complications. We have enough evidence to proceed with the arrest. Delaying could escalate the situation."

Choi looked uneasy. "But we need to address these inconsistencies. It seems like there could be more to this than what we currently know."

Yubin met his gaze steadily. "I understand. The discrepancies are noted, but our priority right now is to handle the immediate aspects of the case. We can revisit the details and any further investigation once Minho is in custody. For now, focus on executing the arrest efficiently."

Kim and Choi exchanged uncertain looks but nodded in agreement. "Understood, Chief. We'll proceed with the arrest as instructed."

Yubin gave a reassuring nod. "Thank you for your understanding. Make sure the arrest is conducted discreetly and manage the situation carefully."

As Yubin walked out of the room, her phone buzzed with a message. She glanced at it briefly, a hint of satisfaction in her eyes before she continued down the hallway. The path to arrest Minho had been set, and the investigation was being abruptly curtailed. The larger picture remained obscured, but for now, the focus was on containing the fallout and closing the case.

Chapter 12 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149432368>)

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_12_endnotes\)](#).)

Jisung's heart pounded as he sped through the city streets, the urgency of the situation propelling him forward. He had just finished up the final touches on his song when received a call from the detectives inquiring about Minho, and his gut had told him something was terribly wrong. Jisung had misled them, telling them Minho was headed to the company, hoping to buy some time. Now, he had to find Minho before the detectives did.

As he approached Minho's apartment building, he spotted Minho walking towards the entrance. Relief and panic hit Jisung simultaneously. He pulled over sharply, leaping out of the car and running toward Minho.

"Hyung!" Jisung's voice was strained but urgent.

Minho turned around, his expression shifting from confusion to surprise as he saw Jisung running towards him.

"Sungie, What's going on?" Minho asked, his voice filled with concern. "I was just heading home."

Jisung grabbed Minho by the arm, his voice low and urgent.

"You need to get in the car. Now. I just talked to the detectives—they're looking for you."

Minho's eyes widened in shock. "Detectives? Why? What's happening?"

"I don't have all the details, but something's gone wrong. We need to get out of here before they catch up with us," Jisung said, pulling Minho toward the car.

Minho hesitated for a moment, clearly overwhelmed, but Jisung's determined look convinced him. They hurried to Jisung's car, and Minho climbed in quickly.

Jisung started the engine and sped off, weaving through traffic. Minho sat in the passenger seat, his face a mix of confusion and anxiety.

"Where are we going?", he asked.

"We can't go to either of our houses, they are bound to check there first when they realize you're not at the company. Changbin told me about this place you could stay", Jisung replied, keeping his eyes in the road.

Just then, Jisung's phone buzzed with a call. The car's bluetooth connected automatically, and Felix's voice filled the vehicle's speakers.

"Felix, I'm on the move. What's up?" Jisung said, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Jisungie, are you with Minho hyung? I heard the police just came by the company looking for him. What's going on?" Felix's voice was filled with concern and confusion.

Jisung's grip tightened on the steering wheel. He shot a quick glance at Minho, who was sitting in the passenger seat, looking increasingly anxious. The speaker carried Felix's worried tone clearly through the car's interior.

"Yeah, I'm with him," Jisung said, his voice taut. "I had to get him out of there. The detectives were asking about him, and I wasn't sure what they wanted. I think something serious is going on."

"Dammit," Felix swore under his breath. "I'm trying to find out more, but it's chaotic here."

"Can you grab Innies and get over to the place Changbin had told us about last month?", Jisung asked after thinking for a few seconds.

"Oh you're going there? Alright," Felix said, ending the call. He turned his attention back to the road, the weight of Felix's words adding to his already mounting anxiety.

Jisung drives through winding roads, finally arriving at a modern, sleek cabin hidden away in the woods. The cabin, surrounded by dense trees and tucked away from view, offers an aura of secrecy and safety. Minho, who has been anxiously watching the passing scenery, looks puzzled as they approach the cabin.

"Why are we here?" Minho asks, his voice tinged with confusion.

"This place belongs to someone we can trust," Jisung explains. "We need a secure place for now."

They park and head towards the entrance. Minho's phone starts buzzing furiously, its screen lighting up with incoming calls from unknown numbers. Minho's anxiety intensifies as he sees the endless stream of calls.

"What's happening?" Minho asks, his hands shaking as he tries to answer one of the calls.

Jisung notices the distress on Minho's face and his eyes dart to the phone. Remembering Minho's earlier mention of getting a new phone, Jisung realizes that the situation has escalated rapidly.

"Don't," Jisung says firmly, taking the phone from Minho's grasp. "You need to stay calm, Hyung"

Jisung switches off the phone, silencing the constant ringing. Minho looks at him with wide eyes, clearly panicked.

"What if it's important? What if they're trying to reach me for something crucial?"

Jisung places a reassuring hand on Minho's shoulder. "Right now, we need to focus on keeping you safe. We'll deal with whatever messages and calls later. For now, you need to calm down."

Minho sat down on the patio, burying his face in his hands, the darkness falling around him reflecting the darkness inside him right then.

Detectives Kim and Choi, accompanied by a few officers, approached Minho's apartment building. The atmosphere was tense as they made their way through the lobby and up to Minho's floor. Kim, clearly agitated, took a deep breath before unlocking the apartment door with the warrant keys.

Upon entering the dimly lit apartment, the silence was interrupted only by the sound of their footsteps. The space was immaculate, three cats—two orange and one grey—watched the newcomers with a blend of hostility and unease.

Kim and Choi led the search, methodically inspecting the main living area and kitchen. The cats, visibly displeased, hissed and arched their backs, their tails fluffed up in agitation.

Choi moved towards the bedroom, his gaze sweeping over the organized space. He rifled through the closet and drawers with practiced efficiency, but the room showed no signs of Minho's presence—everything was neatly arranged, and there was no indication of a recent disturbance.

In the study, Kim examined the desk and shelves, carefully scanning for anything out of the ordinary. The cats followed him with their eyes, their disdain apparent in their twitching tails and occasional growls.

An officer approached Kim, breaking the silence. "We've checked everywhere, sir. No sign of Minho."

Kim nodded curtly and glanced at Choi, who had returned to the living area. "He's not here. We need to report back and await further instructions."

As they wrapped up their search, the cats' hostility remained palpable. They hissed and growled at the departing officers, clearly upset by the intrusion. Kim gave one last look around the apartment, noting the serene yet hostile demeanor of the cats amidst the urgency of their task.

Before leaving, Choi received a call from their superior, Kim Yubin. After a brief conversation, Choi relayed the new instructions to Kim and the team.

"Yubin insists we accelerate our efforts," Choi said, his frustration evident. "We need to locate Minho as soon as possible."

In a sleek, modern office with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city, Kim Yubin sat at her polished desk, her expression inscrutable. The room was quiet, save for the hum of the air conditioning and the occasional distant sound of city traffic.

Yubin picked up her phone, her fingers gliding over the screen to dial a number. She waited a moment before a voice answered on the other end.

"This is Yubin," she said calmly. "Yes, I've just received the latest update from Kim and Choi."

She paused, listening intently. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she processed the information.

"Everything is being handled as planned," she continued, her tone assured. "The detectives are on the case, and they're proceeding with the arrest as instructed. Minho is being cornered from all angles. The apartment search didn't yield any results, but the warrant will cover any further actions."

There was a brief silence as the person on the other end spoke. Yubin's expression remained neutral, but there was a hint of calculation in her eyes.

"Yes, I understand," Yubin said, her voice steady. "The media coverage is already stirring public opinion. We're controlling the narrative. The focus is now on making sure the case doesn't lose momentum."

She listened again, nodding slightly. "I'll ensure that everything continues according to plan. You'll have my full report by the end of the day. Rest assured, this will be resolved swiftly."

Yubin ended the call and placed her phone back on the desk, her demeanor a mix of satisfaction and cold determination. She glanced out the window, her thoughts clearly on the complex web that was being sewn. The stakes were high, very high.

Notes:

That's the end of Part 1 of the story. Since this is my first time posting something on here, I'll wait to see the response before posting the second part of the story. I have rest of the story written out except for the ending. Will post it soon.

As you can see I'm a multi-stan and there are more appearances in the next part. The story is just starting and its only going to get worse for our Minsung. Bangchan and Seungmin will be coming later into the story. I have dropped a few hints here and there on the bigger picture, let me see if it's as subtle as I think it is. Please feel free to leave comments or any corrections or any feedback.

Chapter 13 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149578003>)

The safehouse was cloaked in quiet, save for the gentle crackling of the fireplace. Minho sat on the couch, lost in thought, weighed down by the burden of feeling responsible for the turmoil everyone was facing. Jisung moved around the small kitchen, trying to focus on preparing a meal, though the tension in his posture was evident.

A knock on the door broke the silence. Jisung approached the door, the weight of the night pressing heavily on him. When he opened it, Felix and Jeongin stood there, but behind them were Hyunjin and a young man Jisung hadn't seen before.

"Hyunjin," Jisung said, his voice clipped. "What are you doing here? And who's this?"

Felix quickly stepped in, trying to ease the tension. "This is Seungmin, Hyunjin's boyfriend. He's here to help."

The moment Jisung heard 'boyfriend', he tensed noticeably. His face momentarily betrayed a flicker of discomfort before he masked it with a steely expression. Minho, standing a few steps behind Jisung, noticed the change immediately.

Jisung's gaze shifted to Seungmin, his irritation now clear. "Help with what? Does he even know what's going on?"

Seungmin met Jisung's gaze with calm resolve. "I'm here because Hyunjin is here. If there's something I can do, I will."

Jisung's frustration bubbled over. "This isn't a place for people who don't understand the situation. You shouldn't have come."

Hyunjin stepped forward, his voice steady despite the tension. "Jisung, Minho is my friend too. I'm here because I care about him, and Seungmin is here because I trust him."

Jisung's expression hardened as he confronted Hyunjin. "Trust? After everything that's happened between us, you expect me to trust you and some stranger you brought along?"

Felix and Jeongin exchanged looks but didn't probe further.

"This isn't about the past," Hyunjin said, his voice strained. "It's about helping Minho. We need to focus on that, not old grudges."

Jisung's temper flared. "You think you can just waltz in here and expect everything to be fine? You lost that right a long time ago."

Before the argument could escalate further, Minho, who had been quietly observing, stepped in. His voice was firm but calm. "That's enough," Minho said, positioning himself between Jisung and Hyunjin. "Sungie, I trust Hyunjin. If he says Seungmin can help, then I believe him."

Jisung, his anger still simmering, took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. He glanced at Seungmin, who remained composed and unaffected, then back at Minho.

"Fine," Jisung said through gritted teeth. "But I'm keeping an eye on them."

Hyunjin's expression softened slightly, though the tension between him and Jisung remained palpable. Felix and Jeongin exchanged concerned glances but chose to remain silent. Seungmin, with his quiet presence, gave a small nod, indicating his readiness to assist.

As they all settled into the living room, the flickering flames cast uneasy shadows on the walls. Minho noticed the tension still coiling in Jisung's posture and resolved to address it later, once they were alone.

Jeongin, having just reviewed the latest updates on his phone, approached Minho and Jisung a news article. His face was serious as he handed his phone.

"Take a look at this," Jeongin said, his voice steady with concern.

Minho and Jisung read the article, which detailed the arrest warrant issued for Minho. The headlines were vague but alarming, hinting at serious charges without providing specific details. As they read, the realization of how rapidly the situation had escalated became clear.

"This explains why the detectives are so urgent," Jisung said, his voice strained. "The situation has moved way faster than we anticipated."

Minho nodded, his expression troubled. "I didn't realize how serious this had become. The news is making it sound like I'm involved in something much bigger."

Jeongin, who had been following the news closely, added, "The media is amplifying the situation, and the detectives are under pressure to act quickly."

Just then, Jisung's phone buzzed with an incoming call. He glanced at the screen and saw Detective Choi Seungcheol's name. With a determined look, he let the call ring through and eventually turned off his phone.

The room fell into a momentary silence, the weight of the decision hanging in the air. Seungmin, who had been quiet and observant throughout, finally broke the silence with a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Well, I guess it's safe to say you're all really committed to hiding a fugitive now," Seungmin said, a wry smile tugging at his lips.

The comment brought a moment of levity to the room. Jisung managed a small smile, appreciating the light-heartedness.

Minho stood at the edge of the living room, bag in hand, his resolve wavering as he faced the darkness outside. The room, dimly lit, felt suffocatingly small. His mother, Yeonjin, was a figure of desperation and sorrow in the center of the room. Her eyes, swollen from crying, fixed on him with a mixture of anguish and pleading.

"Minho, please don't do this," she begged, her voice breaking. "You can't just leave. We need each other right now."

Minho's gaze was fixed on the floor; his heart a storm of conflicting emotions. He fought back tears, his resolve crumbling under the weight of his mother's desperate pleas.

"I can't stay here, Mom," he said, his voice strained and hoarse. "Every corner of this house reminds me of him. I can't do it anymore."

Yeonjin took a tentative step closer, her hands reaching out in an attempt to bridge the widening chasm between them. Her eyes were filled with a raw, aching vulnerability.

"Minho, I know it's hard. I'm not asking you to forget, but we need to face this together. Running away won't help."

Minho's eyes met hers, a mixture of guilt and resolve reflected in their depths. He shook his head, his emotions threatening to overwhelm him.

"I'm not running away from you," he said, his voice breaking. "I'm running away from this pain. I need to find a place where I can breathe again."

Yeonjin's face crumpled as she fought back tears. She took another step forward, her voice barely a whisper, filled with desperation. "Please, Minho. Don't go. We can find a way through this—together."

Minho's resolve wavered, and he looked at his mother with a heart full of anguish. The sight of her suffering was nearly unbearable, but the weight of his own grief was too much to bear. With a heavy heart, he pulled the door open, the cool night air brushing against his face as he stepped into the darkness.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he said, his voice barely audible. "I just need to get away."

As he walked into the night, the door closed behind him with a soft click. The weight of guilt settled heavily on his shoulders. Each step away from the house was a painful reminder of the abandonment he felt deep inside. The cool air offered no comfort, only an echo of the betrayal he felt for leaving his mother in her time of need. Her tear-streaked face and trembling voice haunted him, a constant reminder of the fracture in their relationship.

Minho's life had settled into a grueling routine, dictated by the demands of his studies and his part-time job at a local dance studio. Balancing his rigorous dance curriculum with the responsibility of teaching was no easy feat, but Minho found solace in the rhythm of his days.

The morning hours were filled with rigorous classes at the university, where Minho immersed himself in the technical aspects of dance and choreography. His professors were demanding, expecting nothing less than perfection from their students. Despite the exhaustion, Minho found a deep sense of fulfillment in his studies.

In the afternoons, Minho would head to the dance studio where he taught. The studio, a vibrant space filled with the sounds of music and the energy of eager students, was both a refuge and a challenge. Among the students was Hyunjin, a talented but increasingly troublesome final-year high school student.

One evening, as Minho prepared for his dance class, he set up the studio with meticulous care. The polished wooden floor and large mirrors were ready to reflect the hard work that would soon unfold. His students arrived and began to warm up.

Minho started the class, demonstrating each step of the sequence with precision. Hyunjin, however, seemed intent on pushing Minho's patience. His moves, while technically impressive, were often executed with a rebellious flair that disrupted the class's flow.

"Hyunjin, can you focus on the corrections I'm providing?" Minho said, his voice calm but firm. "Your technique is key to mastering this routine."

Hyunjin shot him a defiant glance. "Maybe if you didn't micromanage every detail, this wouldn't be so frustrating."

Minho felt a flicker of irritation but tried to maintain his composure. "Attention to detail is crucial. Mastering the fundamentals will give you the freedom to express your own style later."

As the class progressed, Minho's patience was tested further by Hyunjin's behavior. The tension in the room was palpable, and Minho couldn't help but feel that Hyunjin's attitude was rooted in something more personal.

After the session, Minho approached Hyunjin, hoping to address the underlying issue. "Hyunjin, can we talk privately for a moment?"

Hyunjin looked up, his expression a mix of anger and weariness. "What is it?"

Minho took a deep breath, trying to empathize with Hyunjin's apparent distress. "I understand you might be dealing with personal issues, but it's important to respect the class and the process. If you need to talk or need any support, I'm here."

Hyunjin's eyes flashed with a moment of vulnerability before hardening again. "You don't know what I'm going through, Minho. Just let it go."

Minho sighed, recognizing that pushing further might not be productive. "Alright. But remember, if you want to talk, I'm available."

As Minho walked away, he felt a mix of frustration and concern. Balancing his role as a dance instructor with his studies was challenging enough without the added complexity of dealing with Hyunjin's attitude.

As the night deepened, Jeongin stood up, stretching his arms. "I have an early morning shoot tomorrow. I should get going, I'll see if I can find out more about the case" he said. Seungmin, who had been quiet throughout the night, glanced at Hyunjin before standing as well.

"I've got classes," Seungmin added, offering a small nod. "I'll grab a ride with Jeongin."

The group exchanged a few goodbyes, but Jisung's attention was pulled towards the subtle exchange between Hyunjin and Seungmin. Hyunjin gave Seungmin a soft, almost affectionate smile—one that Seungmin reciprocated with a brief touch on Hyunjin's arm. The moment was quiet, unassuming, but it struck a chord deep within Jisung. Bitterness churned inside him, stirring up old wounds that hadn't quite healed.

Jisung couldn't explain why seeing them together made him feel this way—why every smile, every shared glance between Hyunjin and Seungmin felt like a knife twisting in his chest. He turned away, jaw clenched, trying to shake off the discomfort that was growing inside him.

Minho, standing beside Jisung, noticed the sudden shift in his demeanor. He had always been good at picking up on Jisung's moods, even when the other tried to hide it. Quietly, he stepped closer to him, his eyes softening with concern.

"Want to go for a walk?" Minho's voice was gentle, offering Jisung an escape from the tense atmosphere. Jisung hesitated for a moment before nodding, grateful for the distraction.

They stepped outside into the cool night air, the quietness offering a momentary reprieve. Minho waited, giving Jisung space to speak if he wanted to, but not pushing him.

After a few moments of silence, Jisung sighed. "It's stupid," he muttered, his voice low. "Seeing Hyunjin with Seungmin... it just—" He shook his head, as if trying to dispel the thoughts from his mind. "I don't know why it bothers me so much."

Minho glanced at him, thoughtful. He didn't know the full history between Hyunjin and Jisung, but he knew enough to sense that whatever had happened between them still weighed heavily on Jisung's heart.

"It's not stupid," Minho said softly. "It's hard when things are left unresolved."

Jisung looked at Minho, surprised at how easily he understood. He opened his mouth to speak, to explain more, but the words didn't come. Instead, he just nodded, grateful that Minho didn't push him for more details.

They walked in silence for a while longer, the tension easing bit by bit.

The next morning, the house was unusually quiet, with each sound magnified in the stillness. Minho woke up to a piercing scream. Heart pounding, his eyes darted rapidly around the room.

Moments later, Jisung burst in, his face a mix of panic and urgency. "Minho, you need to see this!"

Throwing on a shirt, Minho followed Jisung down the hallway to the kitchen, where Felix and Hyunjin stood, looking shaken. On the kitchen counter lay two unsettling items: a photograph and a knife.

The photograph was of a man—Minho's father. Minho's breath caught as he recognized the familiar face from his past. Next to the photograph was a knife, its blade marred with dark, dried blood. The sight was deeply disturbing, with the blood adding a chilling note to the image.

Minho approached cautiously, his face pale. "Don't touch anything. This could be important."

Felix nodded, his eyes wide.

Minho's gaze remained fixed on the photograph, a storm of emotions swirling within him. He could hardly tear his eyes away from the photograph and the bloodstained knife.

Suddenly, Jisung's phone rang, breaking the tense silence. He glanced at the screen and saw it was the detectives calling. With a strained expression, he hesitated, then ignored the call.

Minho turned to Jisung, his voice firm but calm. "Jisung, you need to answer that. We can't ignore the detectives now."

Jisung looked at Minho, his expression conflicted. He nodded slowly and answered the call.

Detective Choi Seungcheol's voice came through the phone, stern and unyielding. "Han Jisung, this is Detective Choi Seungcheol from Cheonghwa-gu. We need to know where Lee Minho is. We have an arrest warrant out for him."

Jisung's voice was strained as he responded, "Detective Choi, I understand the urgency, but Minho is dealing with some personal issues right now. I can't disclose his location."

There was a noticeable edge in Detective Choi's voice. "This is not a personal matter. We have clear evidence linking Minho to the crime scene. We need him in custody for questioning immediately. If you don't provide us with his location, we will have no choice but to arrest you for obstruction of justice."

Jisung's eyes widened at the threat. "You can't do that. I'm just trying to help him."

"Cooperation is not optional," the detective said coldly. "If you refuse to tell us where Minho is, we'll issue a warrant for your arrest as well. This is a serious matter, and we're not playing games."

Jisung's mind raced. He glanced at Minho, whose expression was one of deep concern. "I... I need some time. We're doing everything we can to resolve this."

Detective Choi's voice grew firmer. "You have until the end of the day to provide us with Minho's whereabouts. If you fail to do so, we will proceed with the arrest warrant for you. This is your final warning."

Jisung's heart sank as he ended the call.

Felix and Hyunjin approached, their faces reflecting a mix of concern and confusion. "What did they say?" Felix asked, his voice low.

Jisung shook his head, feeling the weight of the situation pressing down on him. "They want Minho's location, and if I don't give it to them, they'll arrest me for obstruction."

Chapter 14 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149578252>).

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_14_endnotes\)](#).)

In the dimly lit office of the Cheonghwa-gu police station, Detectives Choi Seungcheol and Kim Youngdae were grappling with the mounting pressure from their boss, Kim Yubin. The case was becoming increasingly complex, and their frustrations were evident.

Choi leaned back in his chair, casting a weary glance at the file spread out on his desk. "We need to get this sorted soon. Yubin's breathing down our necks, and we're running out of time."

Kim, scrolling through his phone and reviewing the latest updates, nodded in agreement. "I know. The witness statements don't add up, and now Jisung's avoiding our calls. It's like pulling teeth to get any cooperation."

The phone rang, jolting them from their thoughts. Choi answered the call, his face tightening as he listened. After a brief exchange, he hung up and turned to Kim.

"That was Jisung," Choi said, his frustration clear. "He's claiming Minhø isn't with him, even though our intel suggests otherwise. Jisung's being obstructive."

Kim frowned, clearly concerned. "If Jisung isn't being honest, Minhø could be hiding anywhere. We need to step up our efforts."

Choi nodded, his tone resolute. "I'll organize a team to canvass the area for any signs of Minhø. We should check known associates and other potential hideouts."

Kim started making calls to mobilize additional resources. "I'll get the team out there and follow up on new leads. We need to be thorough."

As Kim spoke with his contacts, Choi reviewed the media coverage. The intense public scrutiny was adding to their stress, making their job more difficult. He couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something wasn't right.

Kim hung up, looking more troubled. "The team will be investigating locations connected to Minhø, but I can't help feeling uneasy about this whole situation."

Choi looked up from the file, his expression conflicted. "I've been having the same doubts. We've got evidence pointing to Minhø, but something about this case just doesn't add up. What if he's not the real culprit?"

Kim's face reflected his own uncertainty. "We need to be careful. If we're wrong, we could be making a huge mistake. But with Yubin pushing for results, it's hard to balance accuracy with pressure."

Choi sighed, running a hand through his hair. "We'll have to proceed with caution. We need to find Minhø and get more information, but we also need to keep an open mind. There's a chance we might be missing something important."

As they prepared to head out, the detectives shared a moment of doubt. Their growing uncertainty about Minhø's guilt made their task even more challenging.

Jisung abruptly stopped pacing and pulled the small USB drive from his pocket. "I just remembered something important," he said, holding up the USB. "I have this."

Minhø and Felix exchanged curious glances. "What is it?" Minhø asked.

"It's a USB someone gave me," Jisung explained. "They said it contains information linking Han Holdings to the murder. I think it's crucial."

Felix's eyes widened in surprise. "You never mentioned this before. We need to check it out."

Jisung nodded. "Yes, but I just realized we don't have a laptop here."

Felix frowned, then his face brightened with realization. "Actually, we do. There's a laptop upstairs in the office room."

Jisung's eyes lit up. "Great! Let's use that then."

Felix led Jisung and Minhø upstairs to the small office room. The laptop was on a desk, and Jisung quickly plugged in the USB drive.

As the laptop booted up, Minhø and Felix watched anxiously. The room was filled with a quiet sense of anticipation. Once the laptop was ready, Jisung opened the USB and began browsing its contents.

Jisung clicked on a file labeled "Evidence_Confidential" and opened it. A series of encrypted documents appeared on the screen, their contents obscured by a complex code. Jisung frowned, scrolling through the documents but finding nothing immediately useful.

"Is this all it contains?" Minhø asked, his voice edged with frustration.

Jisung shook his head. "There's more, but it's not making much sense. Look at this."

He opened another file named "Han_Family_Records" and a series of scanned pages appeared. The documents were filled with financial data, legal jargon, and historical records of Han Holdings. However, the files seemed to be incomplete or fragmented.

Felix leaned closer, squinting at the screen. "It's like a puzzle with missing pieces. Nothing is clear."

Jisung's face tightened with frustration. "There's nothing concrete here that directly connects Han Holdings to the murder. It's all very vague and disjointed."

Felix let out a sigh. "So, what do we do now? This could be a dead end."

Jisung closed the files and turned to Minhø.

Minhø rubbed his temples and leaned back in his chair. "I'm not sure we're going to find anything useful here," he said, his voice tinged with disappointment. "This USB isn't giving us what we need."

He stood up and stretched. "I'm going to make breakfast."

Minho busied himself in the kitchen, cooking some eggs, toasting some bread and brewing coffee. The comforting aroma of breakfast filled the air.

As Minho set a plate of eggs and toast in front of everyone, Hyunjin cleared his throat, glancing at Jisung with a trace of hesitation. "You know, Seungmin could probably help with the USB. He's good with tech and might be able to crack it."

Jisung's eyes narrowed. "That's... actually not a bad idea."

Hyunjin, still uneasy, continued. "Seungmin's in class right now, but I could take the USB to him later. It might take some time, though."

Jisung's voice was sharp. "I'll go with you."

Hyunjin shot Jisung a skeptical look. "Why do you need to be there?"

Jisung's response was icy. "Let's just say it's important for me to be involved. If the information is tied to Han Holdings, I should be present."

Felix, sensing the brewing hostility, interjected. "Jisung's right. It's better if he's there to handle anything that might come up. Hyunjin, you should just focus on getting Seungmin to help."

Hyunjin's expression hardened, clearly annoyed. "Fine. I'll take the USB. But don't expect me to be thrilled about this whole arrangement."

Jisung shot back with a cold tone. "I'm not asking you to be thrilled. Just get it done."

Minho, overhearing the exchange, tried to defuse the situation. "If you two need anything while you're out, just let me know."

Jisung gave a curt nod. "Thanks, Minho."

With the breakfast finished and the air still thick with tension, Hyunjin grabbed the USB and prepared to leave. Jisung followed, his demeanor just as frosty as Hyunjin's. The two were focused on the task at hand, but their mutual hostility was clear as they headed out.

In the quiet aftermath of breakfast, Minho and Felix found themselves alone in the kitchen, the remnants of their meal still on the table. The conversation naturally turned to the tension between Jisung and Hyunjin.

Felix leaned against the counter, his expression thoughtful. "There's a lot of history between Jisung and Hyunjin that I don't fully understand. They were close friends in high school, but something happened in their final year that caused them to drift apart."

Minho nodded, stirring his coffee absentmindedly. "I noticed. Their animosity is pretty palpable. It seems to go deeper than just surface-level issues."

Felix sighed, rubbing his temples. "Yeah, it's been a long-standing issue. Jisung doesn't really talk about it, but it's clear it left a deep scar. I wish I knew more to help bridge the gap."

Minho looked up, his gaze steady. "How did you and Jisung end up getting so close?"

Felix's expression softened. "It's a bit of an old story. I found him crying alone in an alley by the park when we were in middle school. I didn't know what was wrong, but something about the situation made me reach out. We ended up becoming good friends after that."

Minho's eyes reflected a mix of understanding and curiosity. "It sounds like you've been a constant support for him through a lot."

Felix nodded. "Yeah, I guess I have. It's just difficult seeing him and Hyunjin like this, especially when I know how close they used to be."

Minho's expression softened with concern. "That sounds rough. It must have been a tough time for him. Whatever happened with Hyunjin just adds to the complexity, doesn't it?"

Felix agreed, his tone reflective. "Yeah, it does. They had a strong friendship before everything fell apart. It's a shame they're so at odds now, especially with everything else going on."

Minho nodded, his thoughts clearly racing. "I hope they can work things out. We need everyone focused and united if we're going to handle the mess we're in."

Felix nodded, understanding the gravity of Minho's concern. "Definitely. The more we can sort out personal issues, the better we can handle the bigger problems."

The two men sat in silence for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts about the tangled relationships and the looming challenges ahead.

As they drove through the dimly lit streets, the tension in Jisung's car was palpable. The low hum of the engine filled the silence, the dashboard lights casting a soft glow across their faces.

Hyunjin sat stiffly in the passenger seat, arms crossed, his gaze fixed out the window. The city blurred by, but neither of them paid any attention to the passing scenery. The silence between them was heavy, weighed down by old resentments and unresolved issues.

"Why didn't you tell us about the USB sooner?" Hyunjin's voice broke the quiet, sharp with accusation.

Jisung kept his eyes on the road, his grip on the steering wheel tightening. "I didn't think it was relevant. I forgot about it in the chaos."

Hyunjin scoffed, turning to glare at him. "You forgot? This could be the key to everything, and you just forgot?"

"It's not like I planned this, Hyunjin," Jisung snapped back, frustration seeping into his tone. "I've had a lot on my mind. You think this has been easy for me?"

Hyunjin's expression hardened, his anger simmering just below the surface. "You always do this, Jisung. Keeping things to yourself, making decisions on your own. You've been like this since high school."

Jisung's jaw clenched at the mention of their past, the memories still raw. "Maybe because I had no choice. Not that you'd understand."

"Don't give me that," Hyunjin shot back, his voice rising. "You've always had a choice. You just chose to shut me out."

Jisung's eyes flicked to him, anger flashing in his gaze. "You think I wanted to? You have no idea what I've been through, what I've had to deal with. You're so quick to judge, but you never once tried to understand."

Hyunjin's hands balled into fists, his knuckles white. "And whose fault is that? You didn't let me in. You pushed me away, Jisung."

The words hung in the air, the weight of them pressing down on both of them. Jisung's grip on the steering wheel tightened until his knuckles ached, but he didn't respond. The truth of Hyunjin's words stung, but so did the memories of how things had fallen apart between them.

The rest of the drive was filled with a tense, uneasy silence. The unresolved anger between them simmered beneath the surface, neither of them willing to break the quiet again. The closer they got to the university, the more the tension built, each of them lost in their own thoughts, replaying old arguments and nursing old wounds.

When they reached the computer lab, Seungmin was already there, engrossed in his work. The glow of the laptop screen highlighted the faint circles under his eyes, a sign of a long night spent staring at codes and algorithms. He looked up as they entered, offering a brief nod.

"You have the USB?" Seungmin asked, his voice calm and focused.

Jisung handed over the USB, a knot of unease tightening in his stomach. "Yeah. We need to know what's on it."

Without another word, Seungmin plugged the USB into the computer and began working. The room was silent except for the sound of keys tapping and the occasional hum of the machine. Jisung's anxiety grew with each passing second, his heart pounding in anticipation of what they might find.

Finally, Seungmin paused, his eyes narrowing as he clicked on a file. "There's something encrypted here," he murmured, mostly to himself. "Give me a moment."

As Seungmin worked on decrypting the file, Jisung's mind raced. He didn't know what he was expecting, but the anxiety gnawing at him was growing with each passing second. He shot a glance at Hyunjin, who was watching Seungmin with an unreadable expression. For a moment, Jisung wondered if Hyunjin felt the same unease he did.

Seungmin leaned back slightly, his fingers hovering over the keyboard as the encrypted file finally opened. "It's a video," he said, his tone carefully neutral.

The room fell silent as the video began to play on Seungmin's laptop. The grainy footage showed a man sitting at a desk, his posture tense, as another figure loomed over him, speaking in low, threatening tones. Jisung's breath caught in his throat when he recognized the man—it was his father.

The voice of the figure wasn't clear, but the intent was unmistakable. Threats were being made, and Jisung's father looked cornered, his usual composed demeanor replaced by one of fear and submission. The sight was jarring, a stark contrast to the cold image Jisung had always held of his father. His mind raced, piecing together the implications of what he was seeing.

Hyunjin and Seungmin watched the video with furrowed brows, trying to make sense of it. To them, it was just another man being coerced, but to Jisung, it was a devastating blow. He felt a wave of nausea rising, his hands clenching into fists as he struggled to maintain his composure.

"This is... disturbing," Seungmin murmured, glancing at Hyunjin for confirmation.

Hyunjin nodded, still focused on the screen. "Yeah, whoever this guy is, he's in deep trouble."

Jisung remained silent, his mind a storm of conflicting emotions. The weight of the secret he had carried for so long felt heavier than ever.

Seungmin turned to Jisung. "Any idea who these people are? They seem connected to something big."

Jisung forced himself to meet Seungmin's gaze, masking the turmoil inside. "I don't know," he lied, his voice tight. "But we need to find out what they wanted from him."

Hyunjin, sensing something off in Jisung's tone, narrowed his eyes but didn't press the issue. Instead, he nodded in agreement. "Yeah, we do. Let's figure out how this ties into everything else."

As the video ended, Jisung fought the urge to crumble under the weight of what he had just witnessed. His father, a man he had always seen as invincible, was being manipulated, controlled.

Notes:

I just realized I'm not happy with whatever I've written after this. So next update might take some time.

Chapter 15 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149747731>)

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_15_endnotes\)](#).)

As Hyunjin and Jisung drove back from the university, the silence inside the car was thick and uncomfortable. The city blurred past them, but Hyunjin couldn't shake the gnawing feeling that something was terribly wrong. His eyes flicked toward Jisung, who sat stiffly in the passenger seat, his hands balled into fists on his lap. Jisung, usually so quick with a witty remark or sarcastic comment, had barely said a word since they left.

Hyunjin didn't like Jisung—hadn't, in fact, for a long time. Their past was full of unresolved tension and things left unsaid, but this silence was different. He couldn't deny the worry creeping in between the cracks of his lingering resentment.

He thought about asking what was wrong, but the words never made it past his lips. It wasn't like them to have deep conversations anymore. After all, Jisung had made it clear years ago that he didn't need Hyunjin in his life. And Hyunjin had learned to live with that—mostly.

But seeing Jisung like this, so tense and closed off, made something twist uncomfortably in Hyunjin's chest. He told himself it wasn't his place to ask, that whatever was going on with Jisung didn't concern him anymore. Still, when they pulled into the driveway of the safehouse, Hyunjin couldn't help but glance over at him again, his brow furrowing slightly in concern.

"You okay?" The question slipped out before he could stop himself.

Jisung didn't respond, didn't even look at him. He just unbuckled his seatbelt, his movements robotic, and got out of the car. Hyunjin let out a frustrated breath, raking a hand through his hair as he watched Jisung head toward the house without waiting for him.

Inside the safehouse, Minh and Felix were already waiting.

Minh stood near the window, his expression clouded with concern as he watched the two of them enter. Felix, who had been pacing, immediately stopped when he saw them. His relieved smile faltered as he caught sight of Jisung's tense posture.

"Hey, how did it go?" Felix asked, his usual cheerfulness tempered by the clear tension in the room.

Jisung didn't respond, heading straight for his room without acknowledging anyone. Felix shot Hyunjin a worried look, but Hyunjin just shrugged, feeling the familiar irritation bubbling up inside him.

"He's been like that since we left the university," Hyunjin muttered, keeping his voice low. "I don't know what happened, but something's really gotten to him."

Minh's frown deepened. "He didn't say anything?"

"Not a word," Hyunjin replied, shaking his head. A brief flash of something—regret, concern, maybe even guilt—crossed his features, but he quickly masked it. He wasn't about to dwell on old wounds. Not now.

"I'll talk to him," Minh said.

Hyunjin watched him go, taking a seat on the couch with a sigh. He didn't like being left in the dark, but then again, it wasn't his problem anymore. Or at least, it shouldn't have been. But despite the lingering bitterness, the sight of Jisung so shaken, so unlike his usual self, made that uncomfortable worry resurface.

3 years ago

The park was quiet except for the rustling leaves stirred by a gentle breeze. Streetlamps cast a muted glow over the empty benches and paths. Hyunjin found Jisung sitting on a swing, his posture hunched and his expression distant. He approached cautiously, his heart heavy with concern.

"Jisung," Hyunjin said softly as he took a seat on the swing next to him, "you said you needed to talk. What's going on?"

Jisung stared at the ground, his fingers fidgeting with the chain of his necklace. "Yeah, I do. I've been thinking a lot lately, and... I think we need to end this."

Hyunjin's heart dropped. "What? Out of nowhere? Why?"

Jisung's voice trembled as he spoke. "It's not out of nowhere. I've been struggling with things I can't talk about. I'm scared and overwhelmed, and I don't want to drag you into my problems."

Hyunjin's frustration flared. "We've been together for a long time, Jisung. I've been asking you what's wrong, and you always brush it off. Now you're saying you want to break up because you won't open up to me?"

Jisung's face tightened with frustration. "It's not about you not understanding. It's about me needing to figure things out on my own. I'm scared, and I don't want to put you through that. I need to handle this my way."

Hyunjin's anger was palpable. "So, you're just going to walk away because you're scared? You're making a decision for both of us without even giving me a chance to help. It's not fair."

Jisung's eyes flashed with anger. "It's my life, Hyunjin. I need to make decisions for myself. You can't just force yourself into my problems. I need space to figure this out."

Hyunjin's frustration boiled over. "You think running away from this relationship will solve everything? You're shutting me out and making it sound like it's all my fault."

Jisung stood up from the swing, pacing in front of Hyunjin. "I'm not blaming you. I'm doing what I think is best for me right now. I need to focus on myself and deal with my issues without dragging you down. I'm sorry, but this is what I need."

Hyunjin stood up too, his voice raised. "You're making a huge mistake! We could work through this together. I'm here for you, but you're pushing me away."

Jisung's face was a mix of determination and fear. "I've made my decision. I need to do this for myself. It's not just about you."

Hyunjin's voice cracked with emotion. "I don't want to lose you, Jisung."

Jisung looked away, tears welling up in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Hyunjin. I just need to do this."

As Jisung walked away from the park, the weight of their conversation hung heavily in the air. The park, once a place of shared moments and laughter, now felt like a cold and empty space, echoing the finality of their decision.

Felix, who had been watching Minho head to Jisung's room, glanced at Hyunjin.

"He'll talk when he's ready," Felix said softly, sensing Hyunjin's lingering frustration.

Hyunjin let out a small, humorless chuckle. "Yeah, maybe."

Felix raised an eyebrow. "You still care, don't you?"

Hyunjin's eyes flicked toward Felix for a second before he quickly looked away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Felix gave him a knowing look but didn't press further. He could see through Hyunjin's act, but he also knew better than to push too hard. Instead, he let the conversation drop, turning his attention back to the quiet hum of the house.

Hyunjin, on the other hand, couldn't stop the gnawing feeling in his chest. He hated that he still cared. Hated that no matter how much distance he tried to put between himself and Jisung, there was still something there—some leftover piece of their past that refused to die.

But for now, he pushed those feelings down, hiding them beneath his familiar mask of indifference.

Because that's what he was good at.

Notes:

A very short chapter but this is one of my favourite parts in the whole story

Chapter 16 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149855341>)

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_16_endnotes\).](#))

Minho knocked softly on the door before gently opening it. "Jisung, can I come in?"

Jisung, sitting on the edge of his bed, looked up with a tired expression. He gave a slight nod. "Yeah, come in."

Minho entered the room and closed the door behind him, moving to sit next to Jisung on the bed. He could see the strain on Jisung's face, and he wanted to offer whatever comfort he could. "Hey," Minho said softly. "Is everything okay? You seemed pretty shaken up."

Jisung's gaze was distant for a second, but when Minho spoke, his eyes flickered up to meet his. The concern in Minho's voice, his steady presence, made something inside Jisung break. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words caught in his throat.

Minho's brow furrowed, his worry deepening. He reached out and placed a hand on Jisung's shoulder, his touch grounding. "Talk to me, Jisungie. What's going on?"

Jisung stared at the floor, his hands gripping his knees tightly. For a moment, he stayed silent, the words building up in his chest but refusing to come out. But as he sat there, Minho's hand on his arm, he felt the barrier crack.

"It's... It's my father," Jisung began, his voice barely a whisper.

Minho's eyes widened slightly, caught off guard. "Your father?"

Jisung nodded, swallowing hard. He didn't know where to start, how to explain the torrent of emotions coursing through him. "We... we saw a video at the university. On the USB."

Minho's confusion deepened, but he remained silent, waiting for Jisung to continue.

Jisung took a deep, shaky breath. "The man in the video... the one being threatened... it was him. It was my father." His voice cracked on the last word, the weight of the admission pulling him down.

Minho's eyes softened with understanding, but he didn't interrupt. He could see that Jisung was on the edge, teetering between holding it together and completely breaking down.

"I've hated him for so long, Minho," Jisung continued, his voice barely holding steady. "He's always been cold, distant. All I ever saw was how much he cared about the company, how he didn't care about me or our family. I thought he was just another heartless businessman."

Minho stayed close, not saying anything yet, giving Jisung the space to let it all out.

"But seeing that video," Jisung whispered, his voice shaking. "Seeing him being controlled, threatened... I don't know how to process it. It feels like I've been wrong about him, about everything."

Minho frowned slightly. "Controlled? What do you mean?"

Jisung closed his eyes, the image of the video still vivid in his mind. "He was being blackmailed. I don't know the full details, but whoever's behind all of this... they had him cornered. He looked... he looked terrified, Hyung. I've never seen him like that."

Minho inhaled sharply, the pieces slowly clicking together. "And you think this is connected to everything else that's been happening? The murder, the USB, Han Holdings?"

Jisung nodded. "It has to be. It's all connected. But I don't know why. I don't know who's behind it or what they want. All I know is that my father... he's been hiding something, and now I'm caught in the middle of it."

A heavy silence followed as Minho absorbed the weight of Jisung's words. His hand tightened slightly on Jisung's arm, offering silent support.

"Jisung," Minho said softly, his voice low and serious. "You've been carrying this by yourself, haven't you? The pressure, the secrets... everything."

Jisung didn't answer right away. His throat was tight, and for a moment, he felt like he couldn't breathe. But then Minho's voice, steady and reassuring, broke through the fog of his thoughts.

"You don't have to carry this alone," Minho continued. "I'm here. We're all here for you. We'll figure this out together."

Jisung looked at him, his eyes glossy with unshed tears. "I don't even know where to start. I feel so lost, Hyung."

Minho leaned forward slightly, his gaze unwavering. "Then we'll start here. We'll take it one step at a time. We'll figure out what's happening with your father, with the company, and whoever's behind all this."

Jisung let out a shaky breath, a small, fragile sense of relief settling into his chest. He hadn't realized how desperately he had needed to hear those words, to know that he wasn't alone in this.

Minho gave a small, reassuring smile. "I know this feels like too much, but you're not facing it alone anymore."

Jisung finally let the tears fall. He didn't sob, but the quiet tears that rolled down his cheeks felt like a release of everything he'd been holding in. Minho, ever patient, just pulled him into a hug, holding him tightly as Jisung let the weight of it all pour out.

For a long while, they stayed like that—Jisung clinging to Minho as if he were a lifeline, and Minho holding him close, his presence steady and unwavering.

Minho gently released Jisung, giving him a moment to compose himself.

Jisung wiped his face with the back of his hand and took a shaky breath. "We need to tell the others," he murmured, almost to himself. His voice was hoarse, still thick with emotion. "They need to know."

Minho nodded, watching Jisung carefully. "Are you sure you're ready for that?" he asked gently, not wanting to push but knowing it was inevitable. "It's a lot to share, and once we do, things are going to move quickly."

Jisung stared at the floor for a moment, silent. He could feel the weight of everything pressing down on him—the secrets, the confusion, the fear for his father, and now, the realization that his friends were going to be pulled even deeper into this mess. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, knuckles turning white.

"I'm scared, Hyung," Jisung admitted, his voice almost a whisper. "But I can't do this alone anymore. I don't want to."

Minho's hand found its way back to Jisung's shoulder, squeezing gently. "You're not alone," he reassured him, his voice firm. "Whatever happens, we'll figure this out."

Jisung nodded, though the anxiety in his chest didn't completely dissipate. He knew Minho was right. Keeping this to himself wasn't going to help anyone, and the longer they stayed in the dark, the more dangerous things could get.

Taking a deep breath, Jisung pushed himself off the bed. "Let's go," he said, his voice steadier now, more resolved. "I'll tell them everything."

Minho stood up beside him, giving him an encouraging smile. "We'll do it together."

Downstairs, Felix was sitting on the couch, scrolling through his phone, while Hyunjin leaned against the wall, his arms crossed. Both of them looked up when they saw Jisung and Minho coming down the stairs.

Felix immediately frowned, noticing the tension in Jisung's expression. "Jisungie, Is everything okay?"

Jisung hesitated for a moment, glancing at Minho for support. The older man gave him a small nod, as if to say, *You've got this*.

Taking a deep breath, Jisung stepped forward. "I need to tell you something." He swallowed hard, his heart pounding in his chest. "It's about the USB... and my father."

Felix's eyes widened in surprise, while Hyunjin straightened up, his gaze sharpening. They both waited, sensing the seriousness of Jisung's tone.

Jisung continued, his voice quieter now but clear. "The man in the video... the one being blackmailed. It's my father. He's caught up in something—something dangerous, and I think it's connected to the murder."

A heavy silence fell over the room as Felix and Hyunjin processed what Jisung had just revealed. Felix blinked, his mouth slightly open in shock. "Wait... what?" he whispered, clearly not expecting this turn of events. "Your father? Jisung..."

Hyunjin remained silent, but his brow furrowed as he looked at Jisung. The tension between them from earlier seemed to fade slightly in the wake of the revelation.

Jisung nodded, his voice faltering slightly. "I've hated him for so long, for being distant and cold, but now... after seeing that video, I don't know what to think anymore. I don't know if I've been wrong about him this whole time."

Felix got up from the couch, closing the distance between them. His usual playful demeanor was gone, replaced by genuine concern. "Hey, Jisung," he said softly, placing a hand on his friend's arm. "We're here for you, okay? Whatever this is, we'll figure it out together."

Hyunjin finally spoke up, his voice low but steady. "What do we do now?"

Jisung sighed, feeling the weight of the situation settle even more heavily on his shoulders. "I don't know," he admitted. "But we need to find out who's behind this, and why they're targeting my father. And we need to stay safe."

Minho, standing close to Jisung, added, "We'll need to be careful. If this is as big as it seems, we can't rush into anything."

Felix nodded, his usual brightness dimmed by the gravity of the moment.

Jisung gave a small, grateful smile, even though the fear still lingered in his chest. "Thank you," he said softly. "I don't know what I'd do without you guys."

The mood in the safehouse had lightened a bit after Jisung's heavy revelation. The group had rallied around him, and a sense of camaraderie had filled the room. The smell of lunch wafted through the air as Jeongin entered with Seungmin by his side, bags in hand.

"Look who's here with food!" Jeongin announced, grinning as he placed the bags on the table.

Seungmin followed quietly, his usual stoic expression softened as he gave a small nod to everyone. Hyunjin glanced at him from across the room, and for a brief moment, their eyes met. There was a flicker of something unspoken between them, and Seungmin, ever observant, noticed the slight tension in Hyunjin's demeanor. He knew Hyunjin well enough to tell when something was bothering him, and it worried him—though he didn't say anything, he made a mental note to check in later.

Minho, seated beside Jisung, exhaled deeply, the weight of the past few days still visible on his face. "Jeongin, you're a lifesaver," he said with a faint smile, though there was a certain tiredness to his voice.

As the food was unpacked, the door opened once again, and Changbin and Bangchan stepped in. Changbin gave a broad smile, holding up drinks, while Bangchan, the more composed of the two, scanned the room with a calm but friendly gaze.

"Binnie brought reinforcements," Changbin teased, placing the drinks on the table. "Figured we'd all need it after... everything."

Jisung's face brightened a little seeing Bangchan, though he didn't miss the subtle shift in Minho's posture next to him. Minho hadn't met Bangchan properly before, and the weight of the unknown seemed to sit on his shoulders. He glanced at Jisung, who gave him a reassuring nod.

"Minho, Hyunjin, Seungmin—this is Bangchan," Jisung introduced. "He's... well, he's the reason we have this safehouse in the first place."

Bangchan waved, his demeanor warm but reserved. "Nice to meet you guys. I've been helping out from behind the scenes a bit."

Hyunjin raised an eyebrow, not fully hiding his curiosity. "Behind the scenes?" he echoed, glancing between Bangchan and Jisung.

Changbin chuckled, sensing the tension. "Don't worry, Hyunjin. Chan's one of the good guys."

Seungmin, who had been quietly watching Hyunjin the whole time, caught the small frown that passed over Hyunjin's face. He stepped a bit closer to his boyfriend, his hand brushing against Hyunjin's arm. "You okay?" Seungmin asked softly, his voice just low enough for Hyunjin to hear.

Hyunjin glanced at Seungmin, the small gesture breaking through some of his guardedness. He gave a brief, but grateful smile. "Yeah," he muttered. "Just... a lot going on."

Seungmin nodded, not pushing further, but his fingers lingered near Hyunjin's, offering quiet support.

"Everything feels a lot right now," Minho added, his voice a bit distant as he finally looked toward Bangchan. "Thanks for letting us stay here, by the way."

Bangchan nodded. "Anything to help out, really. I'm glad you're all here." He paused for a moment, his eyes studying Minho's tired expression. "I know it's been rough. But you're safe here, at least for now."

Minho gave a small nod but didn't say anything. Jisung, sensing his unease, placed a hand on his arm, squeezing it gently. "We'll figure it out," Jisung whispered, his eyes softening as they locked with Minho's.

For a moment, Minho leaned into the comfort Jisung offered, letting the familiar warmth of Jisung's presence calm the storm inside him. "I hope so," Minho murmured.

Notes:

8 finally

Chapter 17 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149905696>)

After lunch, the atmosphere in the safehouse shifted to a focused energy. The team had gathered around a large table.

Chan cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. "Alright, we need to focus on two issues first. Let's start with where everything started. The breach at Miroh and the media."

Minho nodded. "Yes, I think that's when everything started. If someone leaked my project details, they might be behind the current mess or have valuable information about it."

Chan, glancing at Minho, added, "Seungmin, Changbin and Minho, you guys need to focus on the breach. The rest of us will look into the media issue."

The group split into two teams, each focusing on their respective tasks.

At one end of the living room, Minho, Changbin, and Seungmin were deep in discussion. A series of codes and folders from Miroh Music's internal servers flashed across Seungmin's laptop screen as they pieced together the security breach. Seungmin's fingers flew across the keyboard as he filtered through layers of encrypted data.

"Look at this," Seungmin muttered, leaning closer to the screen. "I've traced some of the breach activity back to a few specific IPs. And these names keep coming up in the files—Jongho, Wooseok, and someone tagged as 'S.Y.'"

Minho frowned, staring at the names. "Jongho and Wooseok? I know them. We crossed paths a few times at rehearsals. But this 'S.Y.'... that doesn't ring any bells. Could it be Soonyoung?"

Changbin glanced at Minho, eyes widening. “Kwon Soonyoung? The choreographer from Dance Real III? I didn’t know he worked at Miroh.”

Minho sighed, rubbing his temples. “Yeah, He works at Miroh. Whoever’s behind this knows too much. This breach didn’t just happen by accident. It’s connected to what’s happening now, with the murder, Han Holdings, everything.”

Meanwhile, across the room, Jisung, Felix, Chan, Hyunjin, and Jeongin huddled together, the conversation growing more animated as they debated their next move.

“We need something big,” Jisung said, pacing back and forth. “The media’s glued to Minho’s case. If we don’t shift the spotlight, things are only going to get worse. Any ideas?”

Jeongin, who had been listening quietly, suddenly straightened up. “I’ll do it,” he said calmly, his voice cutting through the chatter. “I’ll take the heat.”

Everyone turned to look at him, startled.

“What do you mean, Jeongin?” Felix asked, frowning.

Jeongin shrugged, a small smirk on his lips. “I’m an actor, right? The media already knows me. If I get into a scandal—nothing too crazy, just enough to grab attention—it’ll pull focus away from Minho. People love a juicy headline, and I can give them one.”

Jisung looked at Jeongin, his face conflicted. “Are you sure about this? You don’t need to get involved any more than you already are.”

Jeongin met Jisung’s gaze, his expression serious now. “I’m already involved, Jisung. We all are. If this helps clear Minho’s name, then it’s worth it.”

Chan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “It could work. But it needs to be believable. If the scandal feels forced, it’ll backfire.”

Hyunjin spoke up. “Jeongin’s got the acting skills to pull it off. We just need the right angle.”

As the two groups worked simultaneously, the weight of the situation pressed on them. They knew time was running out, but they weren’t willing to give up.

Some time later, Hyunjin’s voice cut through the conversation like a blade. “Are we forgetting something here?”

Everyone looked at him, confused. Jisung, in particular, gave him a sharp glance. “What are you talking about?”

Hyunjin’s arms crossed over his chest, his face darkening. “The threat from the detectives. If Choi doesn’t hear from you soon, he’s going to get a warrant. We can’t ignore that.”

The room fell into a tense silence as Hyunjin’s words hung heavily in the air. Jisung’s heart raced as he absorbed the gravity of the situation. The threat of an arrest warrant was not something they could ignore, but they had hoped to buy more time.

Felix was the first to break the silence. “Hyunjin’s right. We can’t just ignore this. If Choi follows through, it’ll complicate everything we’re trying to do. But... do we really think he’ll go through with it? There’s no real evidence against Jisung.”

Chan, ever the pragmatist, rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Choi’s a seasoned detective. If he’s threatening an arrest warrant, he must believe there’s a reason. But you’re right, Felix. Without concrete evidence, it’s possible he’s bluffing to force Jisung’s hand.”

Jisung glanced at the group, feeling a mix of relief and apprehension. “I... I don’t know. I’m not sure what Choi is capable of. But if he’s bluffing, we need to find out.”

Jeongin, still calm despite the tension, nodded in agreement. “It would make sense. If Choi doesn’t have solid evidence, issuing a warrant might be a way to pressure us into cooperating. He wants Minho’s location, and if he thinks threatening Jisung will get him that information, he might be willing to make an empty threat.”

Changbin, leaning over Seungmin’s laptop, looked up with a determined expression. “So, what do we do? How can we verify whether Choi’s bluffing or if he’s genuinely about to get a warrant?”

Minho, pacing slightly, added, “We could try to get a confirmation from someone within the police department. If we can find out whether a warrant is actually in the works, we can plan our next steps accordingly.”

Chan nodded. “Okay, we need to act fast. I’ll try to get in touch with a contact I have who might have access to the internal workings of the police department.”

Chan made a quick call to his contact and explained the situation, hoping for some insight into Choi’s intentions.

Meanwhile, the group’s energy shifted back to their respective tasks. Seungmin continued to sift through data, Changbin joined him to help, and Felix and Jeongin began brainstorming potential media angles. Hyunjin, while still concerned about the warrant, focused on tracking down any additional information that could help them.

Chan’s phone buzzed with a text from his contact. As he read it, his expression shifted from worried to cautiously hopeful. The text read: “*Choi hasn’t filed for a warrant yet. It’s still under investigation. Be careful, though. He’s known for his persistence.*”

Relief washed over Jisung as Chan shared the update with the group. “It looks like Choi hasn’t gone through with the warrant yet. But he’s still pushing hard, so we need to stay on our toes.”

Chan gave Jisung a reassuring nod. “We’ve bought ourselves some time. Now let’s use it wisely.”

With renewed focus, the team dove back into their tasks.

2 days later – 5 days after the murder

The safehouse, a once serene refuge, now buzzed with a nervous energy. It was a sanctuary for Minhø, who had been holed up there, trying to evade the mounting pressure from the outside world. Jisung had been making frequent trips between his daily life and the safehouse, attempting to balance his responsibilities with his desire to support Minhø. The walls of the safehouse bore witness to their quiet determination and the weight of their shared burden.

Minhø, feeling the strain of isolation, wandered restlessly through the rooms. The safehouse, though secure, felt increasingly claustrophobic as days passed. The quiet hum of the air conditioning and the distant sounds of the city did little to soothe his anxiety. He was torn between the comfort of Jisung’s presence and the growing pressure of unanswered work calls and unreturned messages from his mother.

Jisung had been his anchor, providing not just emotional support but also updates and reassurances. When Jisung arrived at the safehouse, he brought a semblance of normalcy with him. They spent time in meaningful conversation, shared memories, and engaged in light-hearted distractions. Jisung often tried to pull Minhø’s focus away from the constant anxiety of their situation, but the pressure was unrelenting.

Jisung entered the safehouse early afternoon, his face lined with exhaustion but also determination. He was greeted by Minhø, who had been waiting anxiously for news. The living room was still cluttered with papers, laptops, and empty coffee mugs, a testament to their ongoing efforts.

“How’s everything going?” Minhø asked, his voice tinged with worry.

Jisung sighed, dropping his bag onto the floor. “It’s been a rough day. We’re still dealing with the fallout from Jeongin’s scandal, and the investigation into the Miroh breach is moving slowly. But we’re making progress.”

Minhø’s gaze shifted to the pile of documents. “And what about the detectives? Any updates on their end?”

Jisung’s expression darkened. “They’ve been trying to contact me. I basically told them to stuff it. They’re clearly frustrated, but it’s not helping the situation.”

In the meantime, the rest of the group had begun to return to their normal routines, albeit with frequent interruptions to check on the situation or provide updates.

Kim Yubin stormed into the office, her face flushed with frustration and anxiety. Detectives Choi Seungcheol and Kim Youngdae were seated at their desks, scanning through the latest updates on Minhø's case. They barely had time to register Yubin’s presence before she exploded.

“What the hell is going on?!” Yubin barked, slamming her hands on Choi’s desk. Her voice was sharp, edged with panic. “It’s been days, and we still don’t have Minhø in custody. Jisung practically laughed in your face when you threatened him!”

Choi clenched his jaw, feeling the weight of Yubin’s outburst. “We’re following the leads we have, Chief. Jisung’s covering for him, but we don’t have enough evidence to press harder. He’s bluffing, but without something concrete, we can’t—”

Yubin cut him off, her voice rising. “I don’t care about the damn evidence! Minhø should have been arrested days ago, and now we’re the ones being made fools of. You two can’t even handle a bunch of university kids!”

Choi exchanged a glance with Youngdae, who remained silent, watching Yubin carefully. The intensity of her reaction wasn’t just about the case—it was something more.

Yubin continued pacing, her words a venomous stream of frustration. “Do you have any idea what kind of pressure I’m under? This isn’t just some random case, Seungcheol. We’re dealing with forces way bigger than you or I.”

As she spoke, her mind flashed back to the phone call from earlier in the day—a moment that chilled her more than she cared to admit.

Yubin had been in her office when the phone rang. The moment she heard the voice on the other end, her stomach dropped.

“You’re slipping, Yubin,” the voice had said, deceptively calm yet terrifying in its control. “Minhø is still out there. This isn’t what we agreed upon.”

Yubin sat up straighter; her throat dry. “I’m doing everything I can. My detectives are on the case, but it’s taking longer than expected.”

There was a pause, a dangerous silence that made Yubin's skin crawl. "That's not good enough. You promised results. We expect you to handle this swiftly. If you don't, well... let's just say there's more at stake here than your career."

"I understand," Yubin had replied, her voice trembling despite her attempt to sound confident. "But you have to give us more time. Minho is being protected. The Han family..."

"The Han family is not your concern," the voice interrupted coldly. "Your concern is making sure Lee Minho is taken out of the picture—one way or another. If you can't do that, there will be... consequences."

A chill had run down Yubin's spine. She knew all too well what "consequences" meant when dealing with people like this. "I'll get it done. You have my word."

"You'd better," the voice replied, before hanging up abruptly.

Yubin had sat there for a moment, staring at the phone, the weight of the threat heavy on her shoulders.

Yubin's face contorted with anger as the memory played out in her mind. She slammed a fist onto the table. "I've got people breathing down my neck, people you don't want to cross, Choi. If we don't deliver Minho soon, it won't just be me who suffers. We're all going down. And trust me, they won't be gentle about it."

Choi's eyes narrowed. He'd never seen Yubin this rattled before. "Who's threatening you, Chief?" he asked cautiously.

"That's not important!" Yubin snapped, her voice betraying her fear despite the aggression. "What matters is getting results. Find Minho, find a way to pressure Jisung, do whatever it takes. Just get him in custody. Or we'll all be paying the price."

Youngdae spoke up for the first time, his voice calm but serious. "If someone's leaning on you, Chief, we need to know who. If we're up against something bigger, we should be prepared."

Yubin's eyes darted toward him, but she didn't answer. Instead, she turned on her heel and stormed out of the room, leaving Choi and Youngdae in silence, the unspoken threat hanging in the air.

After Yubin's explosive outburst, the two had retreated to their desks, staring at the case files in front of them. Both knew there was something much larger at play, and it wasn't just the investigation weighing on their shoulders. Yubin's panic only confirmed it—something dangerous was looming, and they were stuck in the middle of it.

Choi rubbed his temple, staring at the cluttered desk full of notes, photographs, and scattered leads. "We've been chasing shadows for days. Jisung is slippery, and Minho...he's probably holed up somewhere we'd never think to look."

Youngdae nodded, his eyes scanning the screen of his laptop as he searched through surveillance footage from different parts of the city. "Jisung's more careful than we gave him credit for. He's been in and out of the safehouse a few times, but never stays too long. Always just enough to avoid suspicion."

Choi leaned back in his chair, frustrated. "We should have pressed him harder during that last conversation. But that kid—he knows how to push back."

Youngdae frowned, recalling the phone call from earlier.

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Choi's voice had been firm, his tone laced with warning as he spoke to Jisung on the phone. "Han Jisung, you're not doing yourself any favors by continuing to cover for Minho. We both know you know where he is. If you don't cooperate, this will get worse for you."

Jisung's voice, sharp and unyielding, came through the phone. "I've already told you, Detective. I don't know where Minho is, and even if I did, you can't arrest me for obstruction without solid proof that I'm lying. And guess what? You don't have any."

Choi's patience had worn thin. "You think you're clever, but we've got witnesses placing Minho at the scene. If you keep this up, you'll face the same charges."

But Jisung wasn't intimidated. "You're bluffing, Choi. You don't have enough to hold me or get a warrant for my arrest. So stop wasting my time and focus on finding the real culprit. You're barking up the wrong tree."

There had been a tense silence before Jisung hung up, leaving Choi fuming. Jisung had called his bluff, and for now, he'd been right.

Youngdae glanced over at Choi. "You're still thinking about that phone call, aren't you?"

Choi sighed, running a hand over his face. "Jisung's smarter than I gave him credit for. He knew we didn't have enough to act on. But we can't let him keep getting the upper hand."

Youngdae flipped through the file in front of him, scanning the leads they had on Minho. Most were cold trails—places Minho could have gone but hadn't. But there were a few that stood out, scattered across the city.

"We've got a couple of locations we haven't checked out yet. Minho's friends—Changbin, Felix, Jeongin—none of them have been questioned directly, but we know they've been in touch with Jisung. Maybe we start there."

Choi nodded, considering the options. "We need to lean on his inner circle. If Jisung is moving in and out of the safehouse, someone's helping him stay off our radar."

Youngdae tapped his pen against the desk thoughtfully. "There's also a pattern here. Minhø's not just hiding, he's still connected to work, even though he's not answering his calls. Miroh Music had that breach—there's a chance the leak is tied to this, and that might give us leverage."

Choi raised an eyebrow. "You think Miroh's breach is related to the murder?"

"It's a stretch, but whoever's after Minhø might have had a hand in that too. If we figure out who orchestrated the breach, it could lead us closer to Minhø and whatever mess he's tangled in."

Choi stood up, pacing the room. "Alright. We can't wait for this to blow over. We've got Yubin breathing down our necks, and if she's scared, that means there's something big in the works. We need to find a crack in Jisung's defenses, someone who's willing to talk."

Youngdae stood as well, closing the file. "Let's start with Felix. He's been close to Jisung for years. If anyone's slipping up, it'll be someone in their inner circle."

Choi nodded in agreement, grabbing his coat from the back of his chair. "Let's head to Miroh and see if we can catch him off guard."

As they moved toward the door, Choi couldn't shake the uneasy feeling in his gut. He couldn't help but feel that he is just running in circles without actually getting anything done.

Seungmin sat in his university classroom, trying to focus on the lecture while discreetly using his laptop. He had been poring over old surveillance logs from Miroh Music, hoping to uncover something useful that could aid in their search for Jisung and Minhø. The logs were a maze of dates and locations, mostly mundane, but he was determined to find any clue.

As the professor spoke, Seungmin scrolled through the logs. He was about to close the file in frustration when he noticed something odd—a set of logs that didn't seem to match the usual Miroh locations. He hesitated, then decided to dig deeper.

Opening the hidden files, Seungmin found video feeds of a familiar location. His heart skipped a beat as he recognized the layout. It was the safehouse.

The realization hit him hard. Someone had been monitoring the safehouse all along. Panic set in as he noticed that the latest footage showed the safehouse was now empty. There were no signs of Jisung or Minhø.

Seungmin's hands shook as he closed the laptop, his mind racing. He had to act fast. He quickly sent an urgent message to Felix:

Felix

4: 13 pm *Felix, the safehouse is compromised. Someone has been watching everything. Jisung and Minhø are gone. Go there immediately. Urgent.*"

Without waiting for a response, Seungmin bolted from the classroom, drawing puzzled looks from his classmates. He headed straight for Hyunjin's classroom, bursting through the door.

"Hyunjin!" Seungmin called out, his voice urgent and panicked.

Hyunjin looked up, startled. "Seungmin? What's going on?"

Choi and Youngdae arrived at Miroh Music, the building humming with the usual noise of practice sessions. The receptionist directed them with a nod to a private practice room where Felix was and they approached the door, which was slightly ajar.

Inside, Felix was in the midst of a rehearsal, his movements fluid and focused. As the detectives entered, he stopped, tilting his head in confusion.

Choi stepped forward, his demeanor professional but firm. "Lee Felix?"

"Detectives," Felix greeted, trying to keep his tone upbeat. "What brings you here?"

Choi continued, "We need to ask you a few questions about Minhø and Jisung. We believe you might know where they are."

Felix's smile faltered slightly, but he quickly regained his composure. "I—I don't know where they are," he said, his voice steady but his eyes betraying a hint of concern.

Youngdae observed Felix's reaction closely. "You're quite close with Jisung, aren't you? It's hard to believe you wouldn't know something about his whereabouts."

Felix shifted uncomfortably but maintained his calm exterior. "I don't understand why you're looking for Jisung. Either way, I haven't been in touch with him recently. I really don't have any information on their current location."

As Choi and Youngdae continued their questioning, Felix's demeanor remained relatively composed. However, his phone buzzed on the table, catching his attention.

Seungmin

4: 13 pm *Felix, the safehouse is compromised. Someone has been watching everything. Jisung and Minho are gone. Go there immediately. Urgent.*

Felix's heart raced, and he could no longer focus on the conversation. He quickly read the message again, his mind racing.

"Excuse me, I—" Felix began, but his voice faltered as he abruptly started walking toward the door. "I need to go."

Before Choi or Youngdae could react, Felix grabbed his jacket and hurried out of the practice room. The detectives exchanged bewildered glances, clearly caught off guard by Felix's sudden and anxious departure.

"Felix, wait!" Choi called after him, but Felix was already down the hallway, moving quickly.

Outside, Felix pulled out his phone, his hands shaking as he dialed Changbin's number. The call connected after a few rings.

"Changbin. Seungmin messaged. We need to go to the safehouse. Can you pick me up?"

Felix sprinted to the building's exit, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He saw Changbin's car pulling up just as he reached the curb. Without wasting any time, Felix jumped into the passenger seat.

"Go, go!" Felix urged as Changbin sped off.

The cityscape blurred past as Changbin maneuvered through traffic with a sense of urgency. Felix's mind was a whirlwind of fear and worry.

"Felix, what exactly did Seungmin say?" Changbin asked, his voice tense.

Felix glanced down at his phone, re-reading the urgent message. "Seungmin discovered something. It seems someone has been monitoring the safehouse, and Jisung and Minho are not there anymore."

As they drove, Felix's anxiety mounted. He could only hope they would reach the safehouse in time to ensure Jisung and Minho's safety.

Finally, they arrived at the safehouse. Felix jumped out of the car and raced toward the entrance, his hands fumbling with the keys. Changbin followed closely behind, his eyes scanning the surroundings for any signs of trouble.

The door creaked open, and Felix's heart pounded as he stepped inside. The safehouse looked untouched, but the air was thick with tension. They moved quickly through the rooms, checking for any signs of disturbance.

"Jisung? Minho?" Felix called out, his voice echoing in the silent space.

There was no immediate response. Felix's anxiety grew with each passing moment. He continued to search, his mind racing with fears of what might have happened.

Finally, in one of the rooms, Felix found a note on the table, in an unfamiliar handwriting.

"You are too late"

Chapter 18 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149921599>)

Notes:

I'd like to apologise in advance for this chapter.

3 months later

The city was ablaze with speculation, every media outlet running wild with theories about the disappearance of Han Jisung, the heir to one of the largest conglomerates in the country, and his close friend, renowned choreographer Lee Minho. From the moment Jisung's secret lineage was revealed, the public was relentless. Reporters camped outside Han Holdings, their cameras flashing like lightning, hoping for a statement from the family. The Han family, however, had vanished, retreating to Malaysia without a word, leaving behind an ocean of unanswered questions.

Every morning, new headlines filled the news:

"Han Heir Gone Rogue?"

"Fugitive Choreographer Lee Minho: Underground Criminal Network Mastermind?"

Rumors circulated, each more dramatic than the last. The most popular one claimed that Minho had been involved in underground dealings, secretly using his influence as a choreographer to launder money through Miroh Music. According to the tabloids, Jisung had uncovered Minho's criminal activities, leading to their sudden disappearance. Some claimed Minho had gone underground to avoid being arrested for the murder and laundering, dragging Jisung along to keep the heir's mouth shut. The detectives had eventually shut down the murder case and marked it cold.

In darker corners of the internet, conspiracy theories suggested that Jisung's own family was behind it all—disposing of the wayward heir who wanted nothing to do with their wealth and power. The Han family's swift departure to Malaysia

without comment only fueled these suspicions, painting them as cold, calculating figures in a world of luxury and corruption.

There were even reports that Minho had fled the country, that he'd orchestrated the entire kidnapping to extort Jisung's family, making him the villain in a tragedy that none of them saw coming. Some tabloids went as far as to suggest Jisung had joined Minho, throwing away his life to rebel against the suffocating weight of his inheritance. The twisted tales were endless.

The narrative of Minho as a criminal mastermind was growing, his once-untouchable reputation as a brilliant choreographer shattered by whispers of illicit connections. Tabloids printed photos of Minho from months before, harshly captioned with words like "fugitive", "murderer" and "traitor," twisting his stern expressions into something menacing. It didn't matter that there was no strong evidence; in the court of public opinion, Minho was already guilty.

But the most cruel whispers came from those closest to the situation. On campus and in the industry, people speculated about Felix's supposed involvement, suggesting he might have known more than he admitted. Some cast aspersions on Jeongin, hinting that his fame and fortune were part of an elaborate distraction from the truth. Seungmin faced his own share of rumors, his silence sparking theories that his hacking skills were used to cover up the truth. And Hyunjin, burdened with self-blame, was accused by some as the catalyst for the conflict that had led to Jisung's vanishing.

Felix was a shadow of his former self. The vibrant dancer who once filled the room with energy had withdrawn into a shell of sorrow. After Minho and Jisung's vanishing, he had stopped dancing entirely, his body aching to move but his spirit crushed by the weight of guilt and relentless scrutiny. He leaned heavily on Jeongin, their once unbreakable bond now a lifeline amidst their shared suffering. They had spent many nights crying together, finding solace in their mutual pain, though their friendship had become fraught with the unspoken weight of their loss.

Jeongin, however, had pushed through the grief in a different way. He continued working, throwing himself into his career with a determination that surprised even him. As an actor, his face still graced billboards and magazine covers, but behind the scenes, he was a shadow of the person he used to be. The spark that made him a star had dulled, but he kept pushing forward, each role a distraction from the gnawing ache inside.

In the dim light of Jeongin's apartment, their frustration erupted one night. Felix had been reading another tabloid article, throwing it down in disgust. "They're turning Minho into a monster," he had shouted, his voice echoing in the room. "How can they say such things?"

Jeongin, his face drawn and tired, had countered, "I know it's hard, but yelling at the media won't bring them back. We need to focus on what we can do."

Felix's eyes had burned with a mix of anger and desperation. "And what are we supposed to do? Just sit here and watch them destroy their memories? We should be doing more!"

Jeongin's composure had cracked. "Do you think I'm not hurting? Do you think I'm not trying to keep it together? I'm out there, performing, smiling, while inside I'm dying. I lost my best friend too!"

The argument had left both of them spent, the air between them heavy with unresolved grief. They had eventually reconciled, but the strain had left scars on their friendship, a reminder of the deeper wounds they both carried.

Bangchan was the worst off. Outwardly, he still functioned—still produced music, still smiled politely when asked about his work. But behind closed doors, the weight of guilt crushed him. He'd been the older brother figure, the one Jisung had always looked up to, the one who should have been able to protect them. Yet, when it mattered most, he'd failed. And worse, he felt he had led them into danger by not catching the signs sooner. Every unfinished song, every incomplete lyric was a reminder of how incomplete their group was without Minho and Jisung.

Late at night, he would sit at his desk, staring blankly at his computer screen, trying to compose, trying to fill the silence that now permeated every aspect of his life. One night, after hours of staring at an empty composition, he had reached for his phone and texted Jisung's old number.

"I'm sorry. I failed you. Please come back."

Of course, there had been no reply. But that night, Bangchan had broken down, finally letting out the sobs he had been holding in for months.

Hyunjin, on the other hand, was drowning in guilt. More than anyone, he felt the sting of their disappearance because he blamed himself for it. He had let things get out of control, let his unresolved feelings for Jisung—and the bitterness from their past—cloud his judgment. The fights he had with Jisung in the weeks leading up to the kidnapping haunted him.

Now, Hyunjin spent his days going through the motions, attending classes with a heavy heart. The guilt of their last argument was a constant companion, twisting inside him with every step he took. He threw himself into his studies, trying to distract himself from the gnawing feeling of inadequacy. Each day felt like a punishment, a reminder of how he had failed Jisung and contributed to the unraveling of their close-knit circle.

The breakup with Seungmin had only compounded his pain. Seungmin had become isolated, lost in his own search for digital traces of Jisung and Minho. Their last argument had been a bitter exchange of blame and sorrow, the final thread in

their relationship snapping under the strain.

“I’m doing everything I can to find them,” Seungmin had pleaded, his voice breaking. “But I can’t keep living like this, Hyunjin. I can’t keep pretending everything is okay when it’s not!”

Hyunjin’s response had been sharp, his hurt and anger spilling out. “And I’m supposed to just sit here and watch you search for clues? I’ve lost everything—Jisung, you. What am I supposed to do now?”

As Seungmin continued his search alone, his isolation deepened, further separating him from Hyunjin.

Seungmin, having broken up with Hyunjin, found solace in his quiet, orderly world. He continued with his classes but was often seen as detached, his silence and reserved demeanor only deepening the mystery surrounding his role in the whole affair. The whispers about his involvement in covering tracks had only made him more withdrawn, pushing him further into the shadows. He spent his evenings in solitude, the once comforting rhythm of his keyboard now a source of frustration and emptiness.

Changbin was the only one who still held onto hope. Though he too was haunted by the loss, he channeled his grief into his work. Music was his way of keeping Jisung and Minho alive, at least in spirit. Every track he produced, every beat he composed, was made with the thought that one day Jisung would return and they could finish what they started. He kept the faith alive, not just for himself but for everyone else. He refused to believe that this was the end.

As the days wore on, the group remained fragmented, each member battling their own demons while the world outside continued its relentless speculation. The rumors and accusations had created chasms between them, each person grappling with their own sense of guilt, failure, and loss. They were bound together by their shared history and their hope for the future, but the scars left by their arguments and the unspoken pain made it difficult to bridge the gaps.

Chapter 19 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/149965090>)

Notes:

This chapter may provide some answers. Or maybe it would confuse you more. Either way, here you go

The room was bathed in the soft, golden glow of a lamp, creating a cozy atmosphere. A young Jisung was seated on the floor, concentrating on a brightly colored puzzle, while his aunt sat nearby in a comfortable chair, reading a book.

Jisung glanced up and pointed to a framed photograph on a shelf. “Auntie, who are those people in the picture?”

His aunt looked up from her book, her eyes softening as she saw the photo. “Those are your parents, Jisung. They’re very important people and have a lot of responsibilities.”

Jisung furrowed his brow. “But why don’t they come back to see me? I’ve never met them.”

His aunt closed her book with a gentle smile, though her eyes had a fleeting, unreadable expression. “They have important work that keeps them away. Sometimes grown-ups have to make difficult choices.”

Jisung’s small face reflected a mix of confusion. “So, they don’t want to be with me?”

Her smile remained kind, but there was a subtle firmness in her voice. “It’s not that they don’t want to be with you. They’re just very busy. But you’re very special to me, and I’m here to take care of you.”

Jisung nodded slowly, returning to his puzzle.

It was early evening, the sun beginning to dip low in the sky, casting long shadows across the park. Felix had spent the afternoon playing soccer with some friends and was on his way home, still buzzing from the game. His legs were tired, but his spirits were high. The shortcut through the alley by the park was his usual route, and he took it without thinking.

But as he passed through, something stopped him. At first, it was just a glimpse—someone hunched over by the brick wall, hidden in the shadow. Felix slowed, squinting into the dim light. That’s when he heard it: the faint sound of quiet sobs.

He stopped in his tracks.

It was Jisung.

Felix recognized him instantly—he was in the same grade, a kid he’d seen around school but never really talked to. Jisung always seemed cheerful, quick with a smile or a joke. But here he was, curled up in the alley, tears staining his cheeks as he clutched his knees tightly.

Felix hesitated, unsure of what to do. He wasn’t exactly the type to get involved in other people’s business, but something about seeing Jisung like this made him step forward.

“Jisung?” Felix called out gently as he approached.

Jisung didn’t look up, his shoulders trembling with each quiet sob. Felix bit his lip, unsure of what to say. He knelt down beside him, careful to give him space.

“Hey... are you okay?” Felix asked softly.

For a moment, there was no response. Jisung just kept his head buried in his arms, as if he hadn’t heard. Felix sat down next to him, resting his back against the rough wall. The soccer game and the tiredness from earlier were long forgotten.

“You don’t have to tell me what happened,” Felix said after a while, his voice calm and gentle. “But you don’t have to be alone either.”

Jisung sniffed, wiping his eyes quickly as though embarrassed to be caught crying. Slowly, he looked up, his face streaked with tears and his eyes red. He glanced at Felix, clearly surprised to see someone sitting beside him.

“I... I got some bad news,” Jisung mumbled, his voice shaky and hoarse from crying. He looked down again, his fingers gripping the hem of his shirt tightly.

Felix didn’t press him for more details. He didn’t need to know. He just nodded, offering a soft smile. “That sucks. I’m sorry.”

Jisung nodded, his lips trembling as he tried to hold back more tears. Felix watched him for a moment before leaning his head back against the wall, gazing up at the darkening sky.

“It’s okay to cry, you know,” Felix said quietly. “Sometimes, things are just... too much.”

Jisung looked at him, the tension in his face softening a little. They sat in silence for a while, Felix just being there, a comforting presence in the quiet alley.

After a long pause, Jisung took a deep breath. “Thanks... for sitting with me.”

Felix shrugged, smiling warmly. “Of course. We’re friends now, right?”

Jisung blinked at him, a little startled, but then nodded, a small, genuine smile finally breaking through his tears. For the first time that evening, he didn’t feel so alone.

And that was how their friendship began—an unspoken connection formed in the quiet of that alley. From that day on, Felix made sure Jisung always had someone to lean on, no matter what.

A young Minho was bustling around his room, preparing for a small neighborhood talent show. The room was a jumble of excitement and chaos, with colorful costumes and props scattered about. His father, ever supportive, was helping him with the final touches.

Minho, about twelve years old, stood in front of a mirror, adjusting a makeshift costume that his father had helped him create. It was a simple outfit—a bright red vest and a pair of shiny black shoes—that Minho had picked out for his performance.

“Dad, do you think I’ll do okay?” Minho asked, his voice a mix of excitement and nerves.

His father, wearing a warm smile, nodded encouragingly. “You’re going to be great. Just remember to have fun up there and let your energy shine through.”

Minho took a deep breath, nodding determinedly. He had been practicing his routine for weeks—a lively performance to a popular song that he had choreographed himself. It wasn’t anything elaborate, but it was his own creation, and he was proud of it.

As the time for the show drew near, Minho and his father arrived at the community center where the talent show was being held. The small auditorium was filled with parents, friends, and other kids, all eager to see the performances.

When Minho’s turn came, he stood backstage, fidgeting with anticipation. His father gave him a reassuring pat on the back. “You’ve got this. Just go out there and show them what you’ve been working on.”

As Minho walked onto the stage, the spotlight hit him, and he could feel the eyes of the audience on him. He took a deep breath, remembering his father’s words. The music started, and Minho began his routine, his movements sharp and full of energy. The audience watched in silence at first, but soon, they were captivated by his performance.

When the music ended, Minho struck a final pose, his heart racing. The audience erupted into applause, and Minho beamed with pride. His father, standing in the crowd, cheered the loudest, his face glowing with pride.

After the show, Minho rushed over to his father, who wrapped him in a warm hug. “You were fantastic!” his father exclaimed. “I knew you could do it.”

Minho grinned, his cheeks flushed with excitement. “Thanks, Dad. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

His father smiled, his eyes twinkling with affection. “You did all the hard work. I’m just proud to be here to see you succeed.”

That day, Minho felt a surge of confidence and joy. It was one of the first times he truly felt the thrill of performing, and it was a moment that would stay with him as he grew older. It wasn’t just about the applause or the success—it was about the support and encouragement from his father that made all the difference.

It was the first week of high school, and the campus was a whirlwind of activity. Jisung, Felix, and Jeongin had just finished their introductory classes and were heading towards their lockers. The three friends were animatedly discussing their favorite bands and upcoming music releases, their laughter mingling with the buzz of the bustling hallways.

As they made their way to the art room, Jisung, leading the group, was so engrossed in the conversation that he didn't notice Hyunjin stepping out of the room. Hyunjin, with his sketchpad and a couple of paintbrushes in hand, was equally distracted, looking at his phone.

In a moment of chaos, Jisung and Hyunjin collided. Jisung's books and Hyunjin's sketchpad went flying, scattering across the floor. Felix and Jeongin stopped short, their eyes widening in surprise.

"Oh no!" Jisung exclaimed, quickly kneeling to pick up the scattered items. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't paying attention."

Hyunjin laughed, brushing off his clothes. "No worries. I should've been watching where I was going too. I'm Hyunjin, by the way."

Jisung smiled, still picking up his things. "I'm Jisung. And these are my friends, Felix and Jeongin."

Felix, always quick to jump in, extended a hand. "Nice to meet you, Hyunjin. Sorry about the mess."

Jeongin, who had been silently observing, gave Hyunjin a friendly nod. "Hey, Hyunjin. You're in art class, right? Jisung here is always bumping into things. You might want to watch out."

Hyunjin grinned, recognizing the playful banter among the friends. "I'll keep that in mind. I'm actually pretty familiar with this part of the school. Need any help finding your way around?"

Jisung, grateful for the assistance, looked at Hyunjin with relief. "That would be amazing. We're still trying to get used to everything here."

As they walked down the hall together, Felix and Jeongin joined in the conversation. Felix was particularly animated, sharing his enthusiasm for dance and how he was excited to join the school's dance club. "You dance? That's awesome!"

Hyunjin's eyes lit up with interest. "Yeah, I've been dancing for years. It's cool to meet fellow artists. Maybe we could all work on something together."

Jisung, who had been listening with growing excitement, added, "That would be cool! I write songs and sing. It'd be awesome to mix music with dance."

As they reached Jisung's locker, they began organizing the scattered items, chatting about their interests and plans. The camaraderie between them quickly grew, and what started as a chance encounter turned into a promising friendship. Hyunjin felt welcomed into their circle, and the connection felt effortless.

By the end of the day, Jisung, Felix, Jeongin, and Hyunjin had exchanged numbers and made plans to meet up later. Their shared love for the arts and easygoing nature made the beginning of their high school journey feel exciting and full of possibilities.

The late afternoon sun streamed through the high school music room's windows, casting a warm, golden hue over the space. The room was filled with the scattered remnants of their creative process—music sheets, coffee mugs, and a variety of instruments. Jisung and Changbin were immersed in their work, a harmonious blend of their talents coming to life.

Jisung was seated at the keyboard, fingers dancing across the keys, creating a melody that seemed to weave through the air. Changbin, huddled over his laptop and a notepad, meticulously adjusting settings on his equipment and jotting down notes.

Jisung glanced over at Changbin, his face alight with excitement. "Listen to this," he said, his voice filled with enthusiasm. He played a sequence of chords, each one melding seamlessly into the next, forming a melody that was both intricate and captivating.

Changbin looked up from his work, his eyes bright with appreciation. "That's fantastic, Jisung! The melody has such a unique feel to it. It's definitely something special."

Jisung's grin widened. "Thanks! I've been working on this for a while. I thought it could use some of your production magic."

Changbin's face lit up with a smile. "I'd love to work on it. Let's see what we can do together."

As they collaborated, Changbin adjusted the beats and added layers of sound, while Jisung experimented with different vocal lines and lyrics. Their synergy was undeniable, and the music they created together began to take on a life of its own.

After several hours of intense work, Changbin leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms. "You know, we've been doing this as a hobby for a while now, and it's been incredible. But I've been thinking..."

Jisung looked up, curious. "What's on your mind?"

Changbin's expression turned serious, though his eyes sparkled with excitement. "We've got something really special here. We should take it to the next level. We could start performing, recording, and even building a name for ourselves. How about we turn this into something more official?"

Jisung raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “You mean, make a real project out of it? Like, go beyond just having fun and actually try to make it big?”

Changbin nodded eagerly. “Exactly. You have an incredible voice, and your songwriting is top-notch. We could create something really impactful. I’ve been thinking you should adopt an underground persona—something like J.One. It could capture your unique style and the essence of what we’re creating.”

Jisung’s eyes widened at the idea. “J.One... it sounds cool and mysterious. But do you really think it will work?”

Changbin placed a reassuring hand on Jisung’s shoulder. “Definitely. We’ve got the talent and the passion. It’s a risk, but it’s one worth taking. I’ll be here to handle the production, and you’ll bring your voice and lyrics to the table. Together, we can make something incredible.”

Jisung’s hesitation began to melt away, replaced by a growing sense of excitement. The idea of turning their passion into a real project was invigorating.

“Alright,” Jisung said, his voice filled with determination. “Let’s do it. Let’s take this to the next level.”

Changbin’s face lit up with a triumphant smile. “Yes! We’re going to make this happen. I’m sure of it.”

The two friends spent the evening buzzing with ideas, their creativity igniting as they planned their next steps. The room was filled with a sense of purpose and excitement, their combined talents and dreams forming the foundation of what would soon become J.One’s underground debut.

Minho was sprawled on his bed in his cluttered room, surrounded by textbooks and notes for his final year of high school. The hum of his parents’ distant conversations filtered through the walls, a faint reminder of the life he felt increasingly detached from.

He reached for his headphones, eager for a distraction from the weight of his upcoming exams and the routine that seemed to stretch endlessly before him. As he plugged them in and clicked on the latest track in his music app, he let out a sigh of relief.

The music started softly, a smooth, rhythmic melody that slowly drew him in. The lyrics spoke of longing and unspoken feelings, a bittersweet blend of hope and melancholy. Minho’s eyes closed as he let the sound wash over him, each note resonating with the unspoken emotions he rarely let surface.

He found himself lost in the music, the pressures of high school momentarily forgotten. The artist’s voice was captivating, raw, and full of a depth that Minho hadn’t expected. As the song played on, Minho felt a sense of connection, a fleeting escape from his everyday life.

When the track ended, Minho looked at his phone screen, noting the name of the artist—J.One. He couldn’t shake the feeling that this was a voice he wanted to follow, a glimpse into something more than just another pop hit. The music had struck a chord, a subtle reminder that there was more to life than the confines of his room and the expectations of his final year of school.

With a small smile, Minho queued up another track, eager to see where this unexpected new artist would take him.

It was late, long after everyone had left the school grounds, and the hallways were dimly lit with the soft glow of emergency lights. Jisung and Hyunjin stood side by side near the back exit of the building, hiding in the shadows where no one would see them. Their hands brushed lightly, a secret touch that sent a surge of warmth through Jisung.

“Do you think anyone saw us?” Hyunjin whispered, glancing around nervously. His eyes were wide, and his usually confident posture was tense with caution.

Jisung chuckled, shaking his head. “Relax, no one saw anything. We’re fine.” His voice was calm, but his heart was racing. Being together like this, always having to hide, was exhilarating and terrifying at the same time.

Hyunjin’s lips curved into a small smile, his tension easing slightly. “It’s just... I wish we didn’t have to sneak around like this.” He glanced at Jisung, the vulnerability in his eyes clear. “I want to hold your hand in public, not just when no one’s looking.”

Jisung swallowed hard, his own feelings mirrored in Hyunjin’s words. “I know,” he said softly. “But you know how it is. It’s not that easy. Not with everything going on.” His voice faltered slightly. They both had their reasons for keeping their relationship secret—school pressure, personal expectations, and the constant scrutiny from those around them.

They were the perfect students on the surface—Hyunjin with his flawless looks and charm, Jisung with his sharp wit and talent. No one could know about the stolen glances in the classroom, the late-night texts, or the way their hearts beat in sync when they were alone.

Hyunjin reached for Jisung’s hand again, gripping it tighter this time. “But I don’t want to hide us forever, Ji.”

Jisung felt his chest tighten at the sound of Hyunjin’s quiet admission. He stepped closer, the small distance between them vanishing. His free hand reached up, cupping Hyunjin’s face gently, his thumb brushing over his cheek.

“We won’t have to,” Jisung murmured, leaning his forehead against Hyunjin’s. “Just a little longer.”

For a moment, everything else disappeared—the pressures, the expectations, the fear of being found out. It was just them, in this fleeting moment where nothing else mattered.

“I love you,” Hyunjin whispered softly, his breath warm against Jisung’s skin.

Jisung’s heart soared, and he couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face. “I love you too.”

They stayed like that for a few precious seconds, locked in their own world. Then, reluctantly, Jisung pulled away, the weight of reality settling back in.

“We should go before someone sees us,” he said quietly, though neither of them wanted to leave.

Hyunjin nodded, his expression soft but resigned. “Yeah, you’re right.” He let go of Jisung’s hand, the empty space between them returning, but their connection was still strong—something unspoken but deeply felt.

As they walked away, side by side but not too close, Jisung couldn’t help but glance at Hyunjin one last time before they disappeared into the night. He was willing to wait, no matter how long it took, if it meant they could be together freely one day.

Minho, in his early twenties, stands at the front of the room, demonstrating intricate dance steps with precision and flair. Hyunjin, a high school student with a burning passion for dance, watches intently from the sidelines.

Hyunjin’s determination is evident as he practices the moves Minho just demonstrated. However, his execution lacks the finesse Minho has. Minho notices this and approaches Hyunjin with a mix of critique and encouragement.

“Hyunjin, you’re almost there, but try to loosen up your shoulders and bring more fluidity to your movements,” Minho advises, his tone firm yet supportive.

Hyunjin, slightly frustrated, responds, “I’ve been practicing this move for weeks. It’s just not clicking.”

Minho nods, acknowledging Hyunjin’s effort. “It takes time. Let’s break it down together.”

As the weeks go by, Minho and Hyunjin work closely. Their initial tension gradually transforms into camaraderie. Minho’s patience and Hyunjin’s determination forge a bond beyond dance. They start sharing laughs during breaks and discuss their favorite music.

One day, after a particularly intense session, Minho claps Hyunjin on the back. “You’ve improved so much. Keep it up.”

Hyunjin grins, catching his breath. “Thanks, Minho. I couldn’t have done it without you pushing me.”

The room was tense, despite the usual comfort of hanging out in Jisung’s space. Felix and Jeongin exchanged uneasy glances. Jisung had been on edge all evening, fidgeting and avoiding eye contact. Something was clearly bothering him, but he’d shut down every attempt they’d made to get him to talk.

Felix finally broke the silence, looking at Jisung cautiously. “Hey, is this about Hyunjin?”

Jisung’s expression immediately hardened. His jaw clenched, and he sat up from where he had been slouched on his bed. “Can you not?” he snapped, voice sharp, startling Felix and Jeongin. “I don’t want to talk about him.”

Jeongin, who was lying on the floor, sat up slowly. “You’ve been acting weird ever since you two stopped hanging out,” he said carefully, not wanting to make things worse but also needing answers. “You were close, then suddenly you’re not. Did something happen?”

Jisung stood up abruptly, pacing the room. His agitation was palpable. “Nothing happened, okay? We just don’t talk anymore. It’s not a big deal, so stop asking.”

Felix frowned, knowing this wasn’t like Jisung. He tried to approach it gently. “Jisung, we’re just worried. You can talk to us, you know?”

Jisung’s frustration boiled over. “There’s nothing to talk about!” he nearly shouted, turning to face them. “Hyunjin and I aren’t friends anymore, and that’s it. I don’t want to keep hearing his name, I don’t want to keep thinking about it!”

Felix and Jeongin both went quiet, shocked by the outburst. Jisung rarely got this angry, especially not at them.

Jeongin, trying to defuse the tension, muttered, “Okay, okay. We won’t push it. Sorry.”

Jisung ran a hand through his hair, his back turned to them as he struggled to calm down. His emotions were all over the place, and the last thing he wanted was to explain his messy, complicated history with Hyunjin.

After a few moments, Felix spoke softly, “We didn’t mean to make you upset. Just... if you ever want to talk about anything, we’re here.”

Jisung didn’t respond right away, staring out the window. Finally, he let out a long, frustrated sigh. “I know,” he muttered, voice quieter now, but still tense. “Just... drop it. Please.”

Felix and Jeongin shared another look but nodded, agreeing to leave the subject alone for now. The room fell into an awkward silence, the weight of unspoken feelings hanging in the air.

Jisung sat back down, still fuming internally, but grateful for the silence. For now, that was all he wanted—just silence. He wasn’t ready to talk about Hyunjin, and maybe he never would be.

Minho had always been confident in his talent, but when the call came from Miroh Music Group, it was still a shock. He hadn't actively applied—his reputation as a strict and visionary choreographer had spread far enough that Miroh came to him.

It started with a simple email, followed by a formal invitation for a meeting. The offer was a great deal, more than he could have imagined at his age. Miroh wanted him to join their team as a resident choreographer, working with their top trainees. They had seen his work from afar and recognized the potential in him—something not even Minho had fully realized yet.

When Minho arrived at the building, the meeting felt more like a formality than an interview. The director, a sharp-eyed woman with an air of authority, greeted him with a nod as she gestured for him to sit.

"We've been watching your work, Minho," she said without preamble. "Your precision, your discipline, your ability to bring out the best in dancers is exactly what we're looking for."

Minho remained calm, but internally he was buzzing. This was everything he had been working for.

"We want to offer you a long-term contract with Miroh," she continued, sliding a folder across the desk. "The terms are generous because we believe you're worth the investment."

He glanced over the offer briefly, the salary and benefits more than he could have expected. There was no hesitation when he reached for the pen to sign.

"We'll get you started immediately," she said, shaking his hand as he sealed the deal. "Welcome aboard, Minho. This is the beginning of something big."

Walking out of the building, Minho couldn't help but let a small grin slip. It felt surreal. He hadn't chased after Miroh—Miroh had come for him. It was the validation he needed to know that his hard work, his drive for perfection, was taking him to heights he had only dreamed of.

Minho waited outside the marketing classroom, checking his watch occasionally. He had come to the university to meet up with Hyunjin, who had insisted they catch up during his short break between classes. Minho wasn't particularly thrilled about the interruption to his busy schedule, but he had agreed, hoping to reconnect with his old friend.

The classroom door swung open, and Hyunjin emerged, his face brightening as he spotted Minho. They exchanged greetings, and Hyunjin was about to lead Minho to a nearby café when another student caught Minho's eye.

He walked out of the classroom, with his striking, confident aura about him. He was dressed in a stylish yet casual outfit—a black bomber jacket over a simple white tee and jeans, finished off with sneakers that hinted at his fashionable taste. His hair, a soft brown, was tousled just enough to look effortlessly cool. His demeanor was relaxed, but there was an unmistakable charisma in his stride and the way he interacted with his peers.

Minho couldn't help but be captivated by his presence. There was something undeniably magnetic about him, though Minho couldn't quite put his finger on why he felt that way.

As he turned and walked away, heading towards his next class, Minho's curiosity lingered. His thoughts were interrupted when Hyunjin nudged him.

Minho shook himself from his daze and looked at Hyunjin. "Actually, before we go, could you give me your marketing class schedule? I'd like to know when you're free."

Hyunjin raised an eyebrow but agreed, pulling out his phone to share the schedule. "Sure, I'll send it to you. What's up?"

Minho smiled, trying to hide his eagerness. "Just curious about your schedule. It'll be good to catch up more often."

Hyunjin nodded, a bit puzzled but obliging. "Alright, I'll send it over. Let's get that coffee."

As they walked towards the café, Minho's thoughts lingered on the person he had seen. He was already plotting how to time his visits to the university to increase his chances of seeing him again. The brief but intriguing encounter had left him with a sense of anticipation, eager to see where this unexpected connection might lead.

Yoon Jin-seo leaned back in her executive chair, her gaze fixed on the array of screens before her. The office was dimly lit, with only the glow from the screens casting an eerie light over her poised figure. Her fingers drummed rhythmically on the polished surface of her desk, a subtle sign of her satisfaction as she observed the latest news and social media updates.

The screens displayed sensational headlines: "Han Heir Vanishes Without a Trace" and "Fugitive Choreographer: Minho's Cold Case Closed." Yoon Jin-seo's lips curled into a self-satisfied smirk. The media frenzy had been perfectly orchestrated to mislead the public, and her intricate plans were unfolding just as she had intended.

A low chuckle escaped her lips, betraying her delight in the successful execution of her scheme. The so-called "cold case" of Minhø had been expertly manipulated to divert attention, while the disappearance of Jisung remained enveloped in confusion and speculation. There was no concrete evidence linking back to her, just a complex web of deceit and misinformation.

"The Han family's heir... such a valuable piece," she murmured to herself, her tone dripping with a chilling calmness. "And Minhø, the perfect pawn. They thought they could unmask my plans. Foolish."

Her gaze shifted to a hidden compartment in the desk, revealing dossiers on various key figures—police officers, journalists, and high-profile business executives. Each dossier was a testament to her meticulous manipulation and bribery, ensuring that her agenda advanced while others remained blind to her true intentions. The recent stress of Detective Yubin and the hasty closure of Minhø's murder case had all been part of her intricate design. Subtle pressure had been applied to ensure the case was wrapped up, allowing her schemes to progress undetected.

Yoon Jin-seo picked up a photograph of Jisung and Minhø from the desk, studying it with a mix of cold detachment and concealed satisfaction. "They were too eager to get involved," she reflected, her voice low and thoughtful. "Now, they are hidden away, beyond the reach of those who seek them. Their disappearance has only furthered my agenda."

Her attention then turned to another screen, which displayed financial reports and surveillance footage of various locations. Every move made by those involved in the search for Jisung and Minhø was being meticulously tracked. The chaos and uncertainty she had sown were a source of dark pleasure for her, knowing that every misstep by the detectives and the missing persons' friends played directly into her hands.

With a final, chilling thought, she mused, "Let them continue their search. When the time is right, the truth will be revealed on my terms."

A dark, echoing laugh filled the room as she turned her attention back to the monitors. Her plans were still unfolding in the shadows, ensuring that Jisung and Minhø's fate would remain a carefully guarded secret for as long as she desired.

Chapter 20 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/150631876>)

Felix was mindlessly tapping his pen against his notebook, trying to focus on the lecture in front of him, though his mind was elsewhere. Ever since Jisung and Minhø had vanished, his days had become a haze of confusion and restless anxiety. He sighed, sinking deeper into his seat.

The bell rang, jolting him back to the present. He gathered his things, stuffing his notebook into his backpack. As he reached into his pocket for his phone, his fingers brushed against something unfamiliar. Frowning, Felix pulled out a small, folded piece of paper.

The handwriting was hurried, as though written in a rush:

Jisung's alley. 7pm. Don't be late.

-A friend

Felix's heart skipped a beat. The alley. The one where he had met Jisung years ago, when he found him crying alone in the dark. A flood of memories hit him all at once, and with it, a creeping sense of unease.

Who could have put the note in his pocket? He glanced around the hallway, students bustling past, none of them paying him any attention. He hadn't spoken to anyone today. Had he? Felix couldn't remember.

His fingers tightened around the paper as he shoved it back into his pocket. The words replayed in his mind over and over again. *7pm.*

He didn't know what awaited him, but one thing was clear: he had to go. He had to find out. Maybe—just maybe—it could lead him to Jisung.

The clock ticked slowly, each second dragging by as Felix's anxiety grew. When 6:45 rolled around, he slipped out of his dorm, making his way towards the park. His breath fogged up in the cool evening air, the streetlights flickering as the sky darkened.

By the time he reached the alley, his heart was racing. He stood at the mouth of it, hesitating. It looked the same as it had years ago—narrow, dimly lit, with a slight stench of dampness lingering in the air. He swallowed hard and stepped inside.

The shadows seemed to stretch longer as he moved deeper into the alley. Felix's footsteps echoed, and with every step, the sense of déjà vu grew stronger. This was where it had all begun. Where his friendship with Jisung had truly started.

He stopped, glancing around. No one. The silence was suffocating, wrapping around him like a shroud. His heart pounded in his chest, every sound amplified in the stillness.

Suddenly, a rustle from behind caught his attention.

His heart pounded as the shadows shifted, and a figure stepped out. He squinted, trying to recognize them, but their face was hidden beneath the hood of a coat. The air was thick with tension as Felix's throat tightened.

"I didn't think you'd come," the voice said softly, a tone unfamiliar yet oddly soothing. It wasn't one of his friends, and yet something about the way they spoke, the careful way they addressed him, was... unsettling.

"Who are you?" Felix demanded, trying to keep his voice steady. "Why did you leave me that note?"

The figure sighed and stepped closer, keeping their face obscured. "I'm not your enemy, Felix. I've been helping Jisung for a long time, even before all this. You may not know me, but I've been watching."

Felix blinked in confusion. "Helping him? What do you mean?"

"I've been keeping him safe," they continued, voice calm yet carrying an edge Felix couldn't place. "From people who want to control him—people who want to use him for things he wouldn't even understand."

Felix's stomach twisted. "Why didn't he tell us? Why didn't he trust us?"

"Because he couldn't." The figure's voice lowered. "If he had, you'd be in danger too. Just like him. And now Minhoo's caught up in it."

The mention of Minhoo made Felix's blood run cold. "Minhoo... what do you know about him? Where are they?"

The figure shifted again, their face still hidden. "They're safe—for now. But things are closing in fast. If you want to help them, you need to trust me. You won't find them on your own."

Felix gritted his teeth. "Why should I trust you? You're still hiding from me."

A low chuckle escaped the figure. "Because I've kept Jisung alive this long." There was a brief pause, and they added quietly, "And because you're running out of time."

The figure shifted slightly, pulling something from their coat pocket—a small USB. They held it up for Felix to see before tossing it toward him. Felix caught it instinctively, staring down at the object in his hand.

"On that drive is a fraction of what I've done for them, for you all," the figure said. "Look through it. It'll answer more than I can right now. But be careful who you share it with. Not everyone around you is on your side."

Felix's throat tightened. "What does that mean?"

The figure took a step back, fading deeper into the shadows. "You're all in danger, Felix. You've been in danger even before all this started. But if you want to find Jisung and Minhoo, you'll have to act fast. You're running out of time."

Felix's pulse raced. "Wait—how do I find them? Where are they?"

The figure stopped at the edge of the alley, turning slightly. "They're closer than you think. But finding them might lead to more than just answers."

Without another word, the figure vanished into the darkness, leaving Felix alone with the USB in his hand and a million more questions swirling in his mind.

Felix hurried down the hallway, his mind racing. The USB weighed heavy in his pocket, but even heavier was the fear and confusion from the encounter in the alley. He still didn't know who the figure was, or why they had chosen him, but one thing was clear—this was a lead, possibly the only one they had.

When he reached his shared dorm, Felix fumbled with his keys, his hands still shaking from the adrenaline. He pushed the door open and stepped inside, finding Hyunjin lying on his bed, staring blankly at the ceiling, lost in his own thoughts.

Hyunjin glanced over as Felix walked in. "Hey... You okay?" There was a subtle edge to his voice, a mix of worry and bitterness that had been there ever since Jisung and Minhoo had disappeared.

Felix tossed his bag to the floor, breathing heavily. "Hyunjin... I think I found something."

Hyunjin sat up quickly, his eyes narrowing as he studied Felix's face. "What do you mean? What happened?" He sounded half hopeful, half wary, like he couldn't decide if he should trust the sudden glimmer of potential answers.

Felix pulled the small USB from his pocket and held it up for Hyunjin to see. "Someone gave me this. I don't know who—they were wearing a hood, and they didn't tell me their name. They left a note in my pocket during class and told me to meet them at Jisung's alley. I went, and they handed me this." His voice was rushed, the weight of the moment finally sinking in.

Hyunjin's face hardened. "Jisung's alley?" He stood, his expression a mix of skepticism and thinly veiled hope. "What else did they say? Did they mention Jisung? Minhoo?"

Felix nodded, gripping the USB tightly. "Yeah, they said... they've been helping Jisung for a while, even before he disappeared. They mentioned something about people after him. And that Minhoo's caught up in it too." He took a deep breath, his voice unsteady. "They said this USB might have some answers. But they didn't give me much else."

Hyunjin stared at the USB, his jaw clenched. "And you believe them?"

Felix's heart raced as he struggled to find the right words. "I don't know if I believe them, but this could be the only clue we've got. What if there's something on here that helps us find them? We have to check it out."

Hyunjin sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair as he paced the small room. He seemed conflicted, his eyes clouded with doubt. "Fine. Let's see what's on it."

Felix handed the USB to Hyunjin, who plugged it into his laptop. They both gathered around the screen as the USB's contents popped up. There was a list of files, some immediately accessible, others encrypted.

Hyunjin's breath hitched. "There's something here, but a lot of it's locked behind encryption."

Felix leaned in closer. "Can we open any of it?"

Hyunjin clicked on one of the accessible files, and a document opened up. It was filled with notes—scattered information about various people, timelines, and locations. Felix's eyes darted over the text.

"This... this looks like surveillance. These are notes on Jisung," Hyunjin muttered, scrolling through the document. "But why would someone be tracking him like this?"

Felix's stomach twisted. "They mentioned something about people trying to control him, about how he was trying to escape something bigger than we know."

Hyunjin clenched his fists. "What the hell was Jisung involved in?"

They scrolled through the rest of the accessible files, most of which were just as cryptic—scattered details, half-completed reports, and references to people they didn't recognize. But the real answers, it seemed, were locked behind the encrypted files.

Felix groaned in frustration. "There has to be more. If we could just crack the encryption, we might be able to piece this together."

Hyunjin stared at the screen, a mix of frustration and determination etched on his face. "There's someone who might be able to help," he muttered, his voice tense.

Felix looked at him, confused. "Who?"

Hyunjin's expression darkened. "Seungmin."

Felix hesitated, knowing how much tension there was between Hyunjin and Seungmin after their breakup. He knew this wasn't going to be easy. "Are you sure? After everything...?"

Hyunjin's lips pressed into a thin line, his eyes cold but filled with reluctant hope. "I don't have a choice. If anyone can break into these files, it's Seungmin. We'll need him if we want answers."

Felix nodded slowly, understanding the weight of what Hyunjin was about to do. "Alright. Let's contact him."

Hyunjin didn't move immediately. He stood there, staring at the screen, fingers hovering over his phone. The air between them was thick with unresolved emotions, but the urgency of the situation left no room for hesitation. After a long pause, Hyunjin finally picked up his phone and began dialing.

His thumb finally hit the call button, and the familiar ringing filled the room.

The air in the dorm felt suffocating as Felix watched Hyunjin's every move. Hyunjin's fingers tightened around his phone, his face hardening as he spoke to Seungmin on the other end.

"I'll text you the details," Hyunjin muttered into the phone before hanging up abruptly. His expression was unreadable as he set the phone down beside him.

Felix could feel the tension radiating from Hyunjin as he sat back, folding his arms across his chest. "What did he say?" Felix asked carefully, not wanting to push too hard.

Hyunjin rubbed his temples, sighing deeply. "He'll meet us tomorrow." His tone was clipped, the frustration beneath it palpable. He leaned back against the wall, his eyes fixed on the laptop screen. "He's going to take a look at the encryption."

Felix hesitated, watching as Hyunjin's expression darkened, a storm of emotions churning beneath the surface. He could tell this wasn't just about the USB or Jisung and Minho anymore—it was about Seungmin. The person who had walked out of Hyunjin's life when he needed him most.

"You sure you're okay with this?" Felix asked quietly, biting his lip as he sat down on the edge of his bed. "I mean... calling Seungmin after everything..."

Hyunjin's jaw tightened, his gaze still glued to the floor. "We don't have a choice," he said, voice strained. "He's the only one I know who can break into something like this."

Felix frowned, the discomfort gnawing at him. "But it's not just about the USB, is it?"

Hyunjin's eyes flickered toward him, narrowing slightly. "What are you trying to say?"

Felix shifted uncomfortably. "I just... I know what happened between you two. And I get that this is hard."

For a moment, Hyunjin didn't respond. He stared at Felix, his face unreadable, before letting out a bitter laugh. "You think I want to see him again?" He ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident. "I don't. But I'll do it because it's the only way we're going to get any answers."

Felix nodded, sensing the pain behind Hyunjin's words. It wasn't easy to call Seungmin, but they were desperate, and if there was even a chance Seungmin could help, they had to take it.

"I get it," Felix murmured. "I just don't want this to make things worse for you."

Hyunjin's gaze softened slightly, though the bitterness never quite left his eyes. "Things can't get worse, Felix. Jisung and Minho are gone. And we're stuck here, chasing ghosts." He sighed, rubbing his eyes. "I'll deal with Seungmin. We just need answers. That's all that matters right now."

Felix looked down at the USB still plugged into the laptop, his mind swirling with thoughts of what might be on it. "Do you think Seungmin can really help us?" he asked quietly, almost to himself.

Hyunjin glanced at the USB, his lips curling into a grim smile. "If anyone can break into it, it's him." There was a pause, and then, with a bitter edge, he added, "He always knew how to crack things wide open."

Felix didn't respond. He didn't know what to say. He could see the pain Hyunjin was trying to hide, the memories of his relationship with Seungmin, how it had all fallen apart under the weight of their grief and guilt. But for now, they had to focus on the task at hand. Emotions would have to wait.

The silence in the room grew heavy again as they both stared at the screen, waiting for answers they weren't sure they were ready for.

The next day arrived too quickly, and before Felix knew it, he was sitting in the campus cafe with Hyunjin, waiting for Seungmin to arrive. The tension between them was palpable, neither of them saying much as they sat in uneasy silence.

Hyunjin had barely spoken that morning, and Felix didn't push. He knew how hard this must be for him.

Then, the door to the cafe swung open, and Seungmin walked in.

Felix's breath hitched. It had been months since he'd seen Seungmin, and yet here he was, looking just as composed as ever. But there was something different about him now—a sharpness in his eyes that hadn't been there before. Like he was carrying the same burden they all were.

Seungmin's gaze landed on Hyunjin, and for a brief moment, the air between them felt charged with unspoken words. Hyunjin tensed, his fingers tightening around the coffee cup in front of him.

"Let's just get this over with," Seungmin said flatly, sitting down across from them. He didn't greet either of them, didn't offer any pleasantries. It was clear he was here for one thing only.

Felix exchanged a quick glance with Hyunjin before pulling the USB from his pocket and handing it to Seungmin.

Seungmin took it without a word, plugging it into his laptop. His fingers flew across the keyboard as he began working on the encryption, his expression focused, determined.

Felix watched him anxiously, his heart racing. This was it. Whatever was on that USB could be the key to finding Jisung and Minho. He just hoped Seungmin could break through the barriers and give them the answers they so desperately needed.

After a few tense minutes, Seungmin finally leaned back, eyes fixed on the screen. "There's something here," he muttered, his voice low and controlled.

Hyunjin and Felix leaned in closer, their eyes wide with anticipation.

Chapter 21 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/150653989>)

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_21_endnotes\)](#).)

It was afternoon, and the safehouse had fallen into a heavy, eerie silence. Minho sat on the couch, staring blankly at the wall in front of him. His mind wandered back to those early days at Bangchan's place, where everything had felt more secure, safer.

Bangchan's hideaway had been nothing like this. It was a modern cottage, nestled in the woods, with large windows that bathed the living room in warm, golden sunlight. The atmosphere had felt open, clean—a stark contrast to this dim, suffocating space. Back then, there had been life, even laughter, breaking through the fear that hung over them like a storm cloud.

Felix had kept spirits high with his jokes, while Bangchan remained their steady calm in the chaos. His assurance that they had a plan had been enough to ease their nerves, if only for a moment. In that bright, open space, Minho had started to believe they might actually find a way out.

But all of that had vanished the afternoon *she* showed up.

Minho clenched his jaw, frustration bubbling up inside him. He should have known something was off. He did know. But he hadn't stopped Jisung. He hadn't fought harder to convince him to stay. Jisung's trust in her had been so complete, so unshakable, that Minho couldn't bring himself to challenge it. And so, they had left behind the safety of Bangchan's cottage, trusting the woman who had promised them protection.

The safehouse they ended up in was nothing like the cottage. It was old, worn down, tucked deep within the city where the trees were replaced by looming buildings and shadowy alleyways. There were no wide windows here, no sunlight streaming in. The few windows that did exist were small, covered by heavy curtains that were always drawn tight, sealing them off from the world outside. The air was thick, the floorboards creaky, and the door—always locked from the outside.

Minho didn't even know where they were exactly. The woman had been vague, telling them only that they were "safe" and that they had to wait until everything "blew over." Jisung had believed her. Minho, on the other hand, remained doubtful.

Their days inside the safehouse had quickly blended into a monotonous blur. Food and supplies arrived like clockwork, dropped at the front door by some unseen hand. There was always a single knock, and by the time Minho opened the door, the package would be there—sitting silently, like it had materialized out of thin air. He had never seen the person who delivered it. Never heard a voice. The eerie routine only fed his suspicions.

A month after they arrived, *she* came back. That day played on an endless loop in Minho's mind.

"He's not safe here," she had said, her voice smooth and confident, the same voice that had made Jisung trust her. "We need to move him."

Minho had stood up immediately, tension radiating from him. "Why just him?" His voice was sharp, his gaze locked on her.

"It's too risky to move both of you at once," she replied without hesitation. "I'll come back for you."

Minho turned to Jisung, expecting hesitation, expecting him to say no. But Jisung nodded.

"I'll be fine," Jisung had said, giving Minho's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Just wait here. I'll be back."

Minho had watched, helpless, as Jisung packed a small bag and followed her out the door without looking back. He had tried to stop him, tried to convince him that something was wrong, but Jisung had been so certain, so sure that this was the right move.

Minho hadn't seen or heard from him since.

The days blurred together after that. Food still came. Supplies still arrived. But the silence grew heavier. He was alone now, trapped in this suffocating box with no way to contact the outside world. Every time he thought about leaving, about going back to Bangchan's place or finding Felix, Jeongin, or Hyunjin, something held him back.

Jisung's voice echoed in his mind, the last thing he'd said before walking out the door:

"Wait for me. Don't do anything stupid."

So Minho waited. He told himself there had to be a reason for all of this. Maybe there was a bigger plan, something Jisung hadn't told him. Jisung wouldn't have left him unless there was a good reason. Right?

But as the days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, Minho's patience began to fray. He couldn't sit here forever. He couldn't keep waiting in the dark, wondering what had happened to Jisung. He thought about leaving—breaking out and finding his way back to his friends—but every time, something stopped him.

Fear? Maybe. Fear that leaving would put Jisung in more danger. Fear that there was nothing left for him out there. Or maybe it was the nagging feeling that this whole thing was bigger than any of them could handle alone.

He thought about his friends constantly. Felix, who was probably combing the city for clues, desperate to find them. Jeongin, who might be putting on a brave face but was struggling inside. Hyunjin, with his frustration boiling beneath the surface.

And Bangchan. God, Bangchan was probably drowning in guilt, blaming himself for letting them go. Minho could already hear his voice, heavy with self-blame. But it wasn't Bangchan's fault. None of this was any of their fault. It was bigger than all of them.

Minho let out a long breath, leaning back as he stared at the closed door, the weight of everything pressing down on him.

He didn't know what to do anymore. He didn't know if waiting was the right decision, but he had promised Jisung. So he stayed, in this dim, forgotten corner of the world, waiting for a sign that it was time to leave.

Waiting for Jisung to come back.

The next morning, a knock at the door jolted Minho from his restless sleep. His eyes fluttered open, and for a moment, he stared at the ceiling, listening to the fading echo of the knock before he forced himself up.

He shuffled to the door, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. As usual, a small package sat at the threshold. The same nondescript brown box, wrapped tightly with twine, containing enough food and supplies for another day. Whoever delivered it never lingered—just one knock and gone.

Minho sighed, lifting the package and closing the door behind him. He carried it to the kitchen, his movements mechanical. Unpacking. Stocking the shelves. Preparing the same bland meal, day after day. It was a routine, one that had

become so familiar it barely registered anymore.

But today felt different. The silence was heavier. His mind kept drifting back to Jisung—his smile, the way he had said, "I'll be back."

The hope Minho had clung to was fading, slowly but surely, with each passing day.

A sudden noise outside startled him. He froze, heart racing as his senses sharpened. He crept to the window, careful not to be seen, but there was nothing. The street outside remained empty, devoid of life. It was probably just a stray cat. Or the wind.

Yet, something felt off. The silence was more oppressive than usual, as if the walls themselves were closing in.

A knock. This time, different. Urgent.

Minho's heart leapt into his throat. He stood, body tense, and made his way to the door. His hand hovered over the knob. Was it her again? Or... was Jisung finally back?

Taking a deep breath, Minho slowly opened the door, bracing himself for what—whoever—was waiting on the other side.

Minho's hand froze on the doorknob, the sharp intake of breath sticking in his throat as he pulled it open just a crack. His heart raced, every nerve in his body screaming for him to slam it shut, but his curiosity—and something deeper, something unresolved—kept him standing there.

The afternoon light slanted into the narrow hallway outside, casting long shadows against the cracked walls of the building. Standing in front of him, dressed in an understated coat, was a man he thought he'd never see again.

Minho's breath hitched, and for a moment, the world seemed to tilt on its axis.

"Dad?"

His voice came out more like a whisper, the disbelief turning it into something fragile and distant. He blinked, half-convinced that this was some kind of cruel hallucination, some trick his mind had conjured up to break the monotony of these long, excruciating months.

His father—alive, standing there, looking older but very much real—didn't say anything at first. He just stood there, his eyes searching Minho's face like he too was trying to confirm if this moment was real.

"You're supposed to be dead," Minho finally said, his voice cracking under the weight of his shock.

His father gave him a small, sad smile, stepping forward just a little. "I know."

Those two words made something inside Minho snap, and before he could stop himself, he swung the door wide open, backing away just enough to keep distance between them. Every part of his brain screamed that this shouldn't be possible, that his father had died years ago, and yet here he was, as if nothing had ever happened.

"How are you—why are you here?" Minho's voice was a mixture of anger, confusion, and a strange, overwhelming relief.

His father's expression softened, though it was tinged with something darker—regret, maybe, or guilt. "I didn't have a choice. I had to disappear. But there's no time to explain right now. I came because you're in danger, Minho."

Danger. The word rang through the air like a bell, reverberating in the tense silence between them. Minho narrowed his eyes, his shock rapidly being replaced by suspicion.

"In danger? From who? And why should I believe anything you say?" His voice was sharp now, laced with the bitterness of years of unresolved questions.

His father sighed, running a hand through his graying hair. "I'll explain everything, I promise. But first, you need to trust me. We have to leave. Now."

Minho's heart pounded in his chest, a swirl of emotions threatening to overwhelm him. After everything—after losing Jisung, after months of waiting in this miserable safehouse with no answers—now his father appeared, talking about danger and telling him to leave?

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Minho said, his voice low but firm. "Not until you give me something real. Some explanation. Why did you fake your death? Why now?"

His father looked at him for a long moment, his jaw clenched. "Because the people who are after you—they were after me first. I had to go underground to keep you safe. But now... things have escalated. They're coming for you, Minho, and they won't stop."

Minho's stomach churned, his mind racing. He thought about Jisung, about how they'd trusted someone who had taken him away—how every decision over the past few months had been based on half-truths and blind faith. Now, his father—someone he thought he'd lost forever—was asking for the same thing.

His father stepped forward, and Minho instinctively backed away. "I'm sorry I wasn't there when you needed me," his father said quietly. "But I'm here now, and I'm trying to make things right. Please, Minho. We don't have time."

Minho swallowed hard, every instinct in him screaming to walk away, to slam the door and forget this was happening. But a part of him—a small, desperate part—wanted to believe his father. He wanted to believe that this was real, that his

father had come back to save him.

"I can't. What about Jisung?" Minho asked suddenly, his voice wavering.

His father's eyes darkened, and Minho felt a cold knot form in his stomach. "I don't know where he is," his father admitted. "But I can help you find him."

It wasn't the answer Minho had hoped for, but it was something. He clenched his fists, his gaze drifting toward the open door. Could he really trust his father? Could he take this risk after everything?

The seconds stretched out between them, the weight of the decision pressing down on Minho's shoulders. Finally, he spoke, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Fine. But if you lie to me, even once... I'm gone."

His father nodded solemnly. "I won't. I swear."

Notes:

I was reading the whole story again and I cringed so bad at some discontinuities and some rushed scenes and some mistakes in the beginning of this story. So I may be going back and making some edits but it won't impact the story greatly.

Please feel free to leave comments/feedbacks/criticisms. I know I have a good(?) plotline but my writing sucks at some parts.

Chapter 22 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/150695785>)

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_22_endnotes\)](#).)

Minho's heart raced as he stepped out through the doorway, glancing one last time at the place that had become his prison. With a deep breath, he turned and followed his father into the shadows of the narrow hallway. The air felt thick with uncertainty, every step heavy with the weight of his choices.

His father led him through a series of dimly lit streets, the sounds of the city muffled as they moved. Minho couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched, his instincts screaming that danger lurked just around the corner. He kept close to his father, though every part of him wanted to retreat.

Finally, they arrived at an old, nondescript car parked haphazardly against the curb. It looked like it had seen better days—paint peeling, tires worn—but it was a vehicle, and in that moment, it felt like a lifeline. Minho's father opened the passenger door, gesturing for him to get in.

"Stay low and keep quiet," his father instructed as they settled into their seats. Minho nodded, his heart pounding with a mixture of hope and dread. As they drove away, the world outside blurred, each passing moment feeling like a step further into the unknown.

"Where are we going?" Minho finally asked, unable to contain the question any longer.

"Somewhere safe," his father replied, his voice steady but laced with urgency. "I've been staying at a small place just outside the city. It's off the radar, and I think we'll be safe there for now."

Minho remained silent, his mind racing with thoughts of Jisung. He wanted to ask more, to demand answers, but a part of him was still reeling from the shock of his father's sudden reappearance. The road stretched on, and with each passing mile, the anxiety clawed at his insides.

Eventually, they turned onto a narrow dirt road, flanked by dense trees. The branches arched overhead, creating a canopy that blocked out the sunlight. It felt surreal, as if they were entering another world, one where the chaos of his life couldn't reach him. After a few minutes, they arrived at a small, weathered cabin tucked away among the trees.

"Stay close," his father said as they stepped out of the car. Minho followed him up the creaky wooden steps, his heart pounding with a mix of anticipation and apprehension.

As Minho stepped into the dimly lit cabin, a familiar sound echoed in his ears. Instinctively, his heart soared, and he followed the sound into a cozy, cluttered living area. Sunlight filtered through the dusty windowpanes, casting a warm glow over the worn furniture, but all he could focus on were the three furballs sprawled out on a well-worn couch.

Soonie, whiskers twitching in recognition. Doongi, blinked lazily before rising to his feet, and Dori, the mischievous grey cat, darted toward him, tail high in the air. Minho knelt down, overwhelmed by emotion as he scooped up Soonie and Dori, their purring vibrations resonating with his own frantic heartbeat.

"Oh, my babies," he murmured, tears welling in his eyes. It felt as though they were the only connection he had left to a life before everything spiraled out of control.

His father stepped into the room, hesitating at the threshold. "I had to take them in," he said quietly, a hint of regret lacing his voice. "When you went into hiding, I couldn't leave them alone. They needed someone to look after them."

Minho paused, his joy at being reunited with his cats overshadowed by the weight of his father's presence. He placed the cats back down, their soft purring a soothing balm to his frayed nerves. "You took them in," he repeated, as if trying to wrap his mind around it. "You know what's happening."

His father stepped closer, his expression a mixture of pain and longing. "I know, Minho. I should have kept you in the loop. I thought I was protecting you by keeping my distance, by faking my death."

"Faking your death?" The words came out sharper than he intended, each syllable laced with hurt. "You left me in the dark, completely alone."

"I thought it was for the best," his father said, voice breaking. "I had to gather information without drawing attention to myself. If they knew I was alive, it would have put you in even more danger. But I was wrong. I should have been there for you, guiding you through everything."

Minho's chest tightened at his father's admission, the pain of abandonment cutting deep. "You don't get to make that decision for me. You left me alone to deal with everything. You don't know what that felt like."

His father's eyes shimmered with unshed tears, regret etched into every line of his face. "I'm so sorry, Minho. I thought if I could just keep the focus off me, everything would work out. I've been watching over you—and Jisung—every step of the way. But a few months ago, I made a critical mistake. I got too close, and everything spiraled out of control."

Minho felt the weight of his father's words settle over him like a heavy fog. "What do you mean?" he whispered, his heart racing. "You've been watching us? Helping Jisung?"

"Yes," his father admitted, his voice thick with emotion. "I couldn't let anything happen to him, either. I would meet him anonymously, provide help when I could. But that only made things worse. My presence drew attention, and now it's all come crashing down. I had to come back to you. You're in danger, and I need you to trust me."

Minho glanced down at the cats, their innocent eyes filled with love and trust. They were a reminder of everything he had lost and everything he still had to protect. "You should have trusted me, too. I could have helped."

"I know," his father said, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I thought I was shielding you from this nightmare, but I was only pushing you away. I'm so, so sorry, Minho. I didn't want to put that burden on you."

With a choked sob, Minho stepped into his father's embrace, the dam breaking as the years of hurt poured out. "I missed you," he cried, his voice muffled against his father's shoulder. "I didn't know what to do without you."

"I missed you too, more than you can imagine," his father whispered, holding him tightly, as if afraid he might vanish again. "Every day, I thought about how I failed you, how I wanted to be there. I've been so proud of you, watching you grow from afar."

They stood there, wrapped in each other's arms, the world outside fading into a blur. Minho's heart felt as if it were breaking and mending all at once, the warmth of the moment a stark contrast to the icy fear that had gripped him for months. But beneath that warmth, the shadows of doubt loomed—could he truly trust this man who had left him in the dark?

"Tell me everything," Minho demanded, pulling back just enough to meet his father's gaze, his eyes fierce. "I need to know why you did this. Why now?"

His father nodded, determination flickering in his eyes. "I promise, I'll explain everything. You deserve the truth, and I will do everything to keep you and Jisung safe. We're going to face this together."

Minho inhaled deeply, feeling the weight of the moment settle around them like a fragile promise. He was willing to take the leap—just this once. But he would hold his father accountable, and he wouldn't let his guard down so easily.

Minho sat at the small wooden table in the cabin, the scent of sizzling eggs and butter wafting through the air. His father, the man he had thought was dead for years, moved quietly at the stove, cooking breakfast like it was the most normal thing in the world. Everything about the scene felt surreal, almost as if the everyday domesticity was trying to hide the enormity of what had just happened.

Doongi, Soonie, and Dori were all curled up around Minho, their presence offering him comfort. The soft purring from Dori was a soothing, familiar sound. It felt like an anchor amidst the chaos. Minho scratched Dori's ears absently, his mind replaying everything his father had just told him.

His father set a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of him before sitting down across the table with his own cup of coffee. "Eat," his father urged gently, "you'll need your strength for what's ahead."

Minho picked up his fork, but his appetite was non-existent. He couldn't stop staring at the man across from him—his father, who had somehow re-entered his life after being gone for four long, painful years. The questions in his mind

multiplied with every passing second.

"You said you faked your death," Minhø began, his voice low and tight. "Why?"

His father's face was etched with regret as he took a sip of his coffee before responding. "Because I was getting too close to the truth, and if I stayed visible, everything would have fallen apart. Han Holdings... Jisung's aunt, Seo Ji-Young, she was involved in more than we ever realized. She's dangerous, Minhø—more dangerous than anyone knows. I had to disappear to protect you, to keep the focus off me while I gathered information."

Minhø clenched his fork tighter. "You could have told me. You didn't have to just vanish like that."

His father sighed, his gaze dropping to his cup. "I didn't want to drag you into this. The deeper I dug, the more I realized how many lives were at stake, how many people Seo had manipulated. She's been pulling strings in Han Holdings for years, but her influence runs deeper than that. She was positioning herself to take full control, to eliminate anyone who stood in her way—including Jisung."

Minhø's stomach churned. Jisung. Everything always seemed to come back to him. "So... she's been targeting Jisung all this time?"

"Yes," his father said gravely. "For a long time. She's his aunt, but that hasn't stopped her from trying to control him, to use him as a pawn in her schemes. When I realized how deeply involved she was, I couldn't risk staying in the open. I had to work from the shadows, find ways to help without putting you or Jisung in even more danger."

Minhø sat back, the fork slipping from his fingers as his appetite evaporated completely. "What about Jisung? You said you've been helping him."

His father nodded. "I've been in contact with him, but he didn't know it was me. I approached him anonymously. I'd meet him in secret, pass on information, help him when I could, but it wasn't enough. I thought I could protect him from Seo's grasp, but a few months ago... I made a mistake. I trusted the wrong person. It gave Seo the opening she needed to push forward with her plans."

Minhø's pulse quickened. "That's when everything started falling apart?"

"Exactly. She's been tightening her grip ever since. I tried to warn Jisung, but I wasn't sure if I would be trusted over his own aunt. And when I realized she was closing in on you too, I knew I had to come back. I couldn't hide any longer."

Minhø's hands trembled slightly as he ran a hand through his hair. "So... Aunt Seo. She's the same person who led us out of Chan's safehouse, isn't she?" The memory clicked in his mind—her supposed help. It had all been a trap.

His father's eyes darkened. "Yes. She's been playing a long game, manipulating everyone around her. I didn't realize how close she was to striking when she led you both away. I thought I could handle it, but I underestimated her."

Minhø's stomach twisted as the pieces fell into place. Seo Ji-Young had been at the center of everything, and all along, Minhø had thought they had an ally. His gaze fell to his cats, curled peacefully around him, unaware of the storm that had been raging outside their safe little world.

The room felt impossibly quiet for a moment, the sound of the forest outside a distant hum. Minhø looked at his father, seeing him not as the man who had disappeared, but as someone who had been fighting, struggling to keep them all safe, and failing, just like everyone else.

Minhø swallowed hard, the weight of everything they had just uncovered pressing down on him. "What do we do now?"

His father leaned back, his expression resolute. "We expose Seo Ji-Young. We bring her down, once and for all. But it won't be easy. She's powerful, and she's covered her tracks well. But we have something she doesn't—a chance to strike before she expects it."

Minhø nodded, determination settling in his chest. He had spent too long running, hiding, and now, with his father back by his side, it felt like the only option left was to fight back.

But as the silence stretched on, Minhø's mind buzzed with more unanswered questions. He exhaled slowly and looked up at his father.

"But why now?" Minhø asked, leaning forward, his eyes sharp. "Why make yourself known at this exact moment? And how did you even know where to find me?"

His father's smile faded, his expression turning more serious. He sighed deeply, as if the weight of his choices hung on him. "I've been watching from a distance, Minhø. I've been tracking Seo's moves, but also keeping tabs on you, Jisung, and your friends. I've had... contacts. People who kept me informed. And then, you both went with her, she kept you isolated, I knew I couldn't stay hidden any longer so I was waiting for a crack in her defence to slip in and get you out."

Minhø's eyes widened, the realization dawning on him. "My friends... Felix, Hyunjin, Jeongin, Chan—they've been dragged into all of this, too. What about them?"

His father's face grew solemn. "I know. And I regret not intervening sooner. But they're not out of danger. They're being watched, just like you and Jisung. They may not realize it, but they're caught in the middle of this web."

Minhø's breath hitched, his mind racing. "So... we have to protect them too. They don't know how deep this goes."

His father nodded gravely. "Exactly. And that's why we can't waste any more time. We have to be smart, stay one step ahead of Seo, and figure out who we can trust. The people close to you—they need to know the truth, but we have to be careful. Seo will be watching for any slip-ups."

Minho clenched his fists, his jaw tight. "She's not going to get away with this."

His father's eyes met his, the weight of their shared resolve settling in the air between them. "No, she won't."

After a moment of silence, his father spoke again, his voice more cautious now. "There's one more thing, Minho. Not all your friends can be trusted."

Minho's heart skipped a beat, a chill running down his spine. "What do you mean?"

His father hesitated, his face grave. "Someone close to your group has been helping Seo. I don't know exactly who yet, but they've been feeding her information. That's how she's been able to stay one step ahead, manipulating things behind the scenes. You were dragged into this because you were getting too close to Jisung. They wanted you out of the picture, and that's why they created the whole murder scene. It was a setup from the beginning."

Minho's world tilted, his mind reeling. "One of my friends..." His voice trailed off as he tried to comprehend the betrayal. Someone close to him, someone he trusted, had been working with Seo all along.

His father nodded slowly. "I'm afraid so. That's why we have to be extremely careful about who we trust going forward."

Minho's heart raced, anger and disbelief swirling inside him. Everything had been orchestrated to keep him away from Jisung, to pull him into this nightmare of betrayal and danger. But now, he knew the truth. He wasn't going to let Seo win.

"I'll find out who it is," Minho said quietly, his voice hardening with determination. "And when I do, they'll regret ever crossing me."

His father nodded, a quiet understanding passing between them. "We'll get through this, Minho. Together."

Notes:

There. I hope some questions have been answered on what's been going on and who the anonymous person is. It's the same person who had given Jisung the USB in the beginning. Oh and Catracha is safe too :). I've had this planned since the beginning and well, here they are.

Chapter 23 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/150719482>).

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_23_endnotes\)](#).)

Jisung sat at the dining table, forcing a smile as Seo prattled on about mundane topics, her voice a syrupy layer over his growing resentment. He nodded at her, feigning interest, all the while feeling a tempest of fury swirl within him. How could she speak so sweetly when she had turned his life into a cage? Each word she uttered felt like a chain tightening around him, a reminder that he was trapped in her web of deceit.

"Isn't it nice to have some time together, Jisung?" Seo asked, her eyes sparkling with a false sincerity that made him want toretch. He glanced down at his plate, pushing around the food that had lost all appeal.

"Yeah, sure," he replied, his voice lacking the warmth he struggled to muster. He could see her watching him, ever vigilant, as if gauging his every reaction.

Internally, he seethed at the stark reality: she had literally made him a prisoner in his own life. She had orchestrated everything—the isolation, the manipulation, the secrets. He had lost friends and freedom, all under the pretense of protection. The memories of laughter with Minho and the camaraderie of his other friends felt like echoes from another life, one she had worked tirelessly to erase.

The dinner dragged on, each moment stretching into eternity as he bit back his anger. He could see through her two-faced facade; her every reassurance was a lie, a tactic to keep him compliant.

He yearned to break free from the gilded cage she had built around him, to reclaim the life that felt so painfully out of reach. But he had to play along for now, to bide his time until he could make a move.

"I'm really sorry for this situation Jisung," she continued, oblivious to the tempest beneath his calm exterior. "It's for your own safety, after all. You need to trust me."

Trust. The word resonated like a mockery in his mind. The very notion of trust twisted painfully, igniting a fire of anger and disbelief. He wanted to scream, to expose the duplicity in her kind smile. She had played the part of a caring aunt so well, wrapping her cruelty in layers of affection. The memories of their time together, the warmth of family dinners, had now become tainted by the knowledge of her true nature.

“Jisung?” Her voice pulled him back, and he blinked, refocusing on her. He forced a chuckle, the sound feeling foreign and strained. “I just want what’s best for you, you know. You’re so special to me.”

Her words dripped with insincerity, each syllable a reminder of the truths he had uncovered. Special? He had been nothing more than a pawn in her twisted game, a means to an end.

He remembered the notes he had read, the plans detailing her manipulations, and the lengths she had gone to isolate him. He felt disgusted at the thought of how she had manipulated not just him but everyone around them, wielding power like a puppet master. Each fabricated moment of kindness felt like a bitter joke.

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The house had felt eerily quiet, the oppressive silence almost tangible. Jisung had drifted through another monotonous day, each one blurring into the next under his aunt’s watchful gaze. As he passed the dining room, something had flickered in the corner of his eye: the laptop was left open, its screen aglow with untold secrets.

An unsettling mix of curiosity and dread had swirled within him. He had hesitated, straining to listen for any signs of Seo’s presence. That day, however, the house had remained still, devoid of her commanding aura. Taking a deep breath, he had approached the table, his heart thundering in his chest. The weight of uncertainty had pressed against his ribs, yet something had compelled him forward.

With trembling hands, he had grasped the laptop and hurriedly shoved it beneath his bed. Hours had slipped by, each tick of the clock a reminder of the looming danger of being discovered. When the house had finally settled into a heavy silence, he had sat cross-legged on the floor, determination igniting a fire within him.

He had fought against the security measures for what felt like an eternity. Each failed attempt had felt like a personal defeat, but he pressed on. Finally, when the last barrier had fallen away and the screen had illuminated his face, he had been greeted by a trove of information that felt like daggers piercing through his heart.

Documents sprawled across the screen, meticulously organized files detailing his life as if it were a mere puppet show for Seo’s amusement. A cold shiver had run down his spine as he realized the true extent of her surveillance. His every movement had been tracked, every conversation he thought was private laid bare. The familiar feeling of being watched had transformed from a vague suspicion into a tangible, suffocating reality.

He pressed on, horror twisting in his stomach. One document had stood out, its chilling title echoing in his mind: “Isolate Jisung from his parents.” His breath had hitched. Seo had not just wanted him to stay with her; she had schemed to sever any familial bonds he had left. It had been her suggestion that had led to his parents relinquishing him to her care when he had been just a child. Confusion had washed over him as waves of betrayal crashed against his heart.

As he delved deeper, horror twisted in his stomach. A file labeled “Minho’s Threat” had sent a jolt of panic through him. Jisung’s heart had raced as he read how Seo had plotted against Minho’s father, issuing veiled threats that chilled him to the bone. The very friendship that had been a beacon of hope was now a target in her twisted game. Panic clawed at his insides as the pieces began to fit together—Minho’s fears, his caution, all justified in the face of Seo’s malevolence.

As he scrolled, each word felt like a knife twisting deeper. The file chronicled how she had fabricated the murder scene that had once filled his life with dread, a calculated act to drive Minho away. Each letter had echoed with malice, revealing that she had always perceived Minho as a threat to her dominion over Jisung. The thought of Seo playing with lives like pieces on a chessboard ignited a fury within him.

But the revelations hadn’t stopped there. Another file had shattered his heart: “Jeongin—keep him close; he’s useful for gathering intel.” Betrayal had blossomed in his chest like a poisonous flower. Jisung’s world had turned upside down; the friend he had trusted had been feeding Seo information all along. She had threatened Jeongin’s family, coercing him into compliance, and the realization had stung like salt in an open wound.

With every passing moment, the walls of his reality had seemed to close in around him, the darkness swallowing any semblance of safety. Each revelation bore the weight of a thousand betrayals. Jisung had slumped against his bed, the laptop screen illuminating the chaos in his mind. The lies spun by Seo had felt endless, each one a barb that dug deeper into his heart.

He had thought of Minho, Felix, and the camaraderie they once shared. The realization that he might lose them to Seo’s machinations filled him with despair. Memories of laughter and warmth had faded like distant echoes, overshadowed by the stark reality of betrayal.

His fingers had trembled as he clicked on one final document. What he had read had made his blood run cold. Seo had meticulously documented her plans, tracking every move Jisung made, every relationship he nurtured. She had always

known about J.One, waiting for the right moment to use that information to threaten Jisung into submission. Her intentions had been as sinister as they were calculated.

Each detail had struck him like a blow. She had threatened Minho, had toyed with the lives of those he loved, all to maintain control over him. A gut-wrenching sense of loss had settled heavily in his chest as the walls closed in around him, the weight of his reality pressing down like a suffocating fog.

As dawn's light had crept through the window, illuminating the darkness of his room, devastation had clawed at his insides. He had closed the laptop with shaking hands, the weight of betrayal heavy on his heart. The warmth of morning had felt distant and cold against the storm of emotions raging within him.

In the midst of heartbreak and fury, Jisung had vowed to fight back

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The tension in the room became palpable, and he took a breath, the silence heavy between them. "I understand, Auntie," he affirmed again, the words tasting like ash in his mouth. He had to keep up the act, to bide his time until he could strike back.

Her eyes sparkled with satisfaction, the facade of a caring guardian intact. But beneath that surface, he knew her true face, the one that lurked in the shadows, waiting for a moment of weakness to pounce. Jisung felt a renewed sense of resolve; he would not let her control him any longer.

The meal passed in a haze of forced smiles and superficial conversation, each moment a reminder of the mask he had to wear. Yet beneath that mask, a fierce determination grew, fueled by the knowledge that he was no longer the naive boy she thought he was. He would gather his strength and find a way to reclaim his life, dismantling the web of deceit she had spun around him.

After the meal, he excused himself, heart racing as he made his way to his room. Alone at last, he let out a shaky breath, the pretense falling away like a discarded cloak.

Jisung had trusted his aunt Seo when she first arrived at Chan's safehouse, appearing out of nowhere with calm reassurances and the promise of safety. In the midst of the chaos surrounding him, when the media and the world seemed to be closing in on him, her voice had cut through the noise, offering a way out. He had been vulnerable, exhausted from running and hiding, and the allure of someone from his family stepping forward to protect him felt like a lifeline. Minho had tried to object, wanting to keep Jisung close, but Seo's persuasion had been sharp, precise. She had told Jisung that being with her was the only way to keep Minho safe from the mess surrounding him—so Jisung, desperate and lost, had agreed.

The separation from Minho a month later had felt like a knife in his chest. They had only just begun to understand the feelings between them, feelings that neither had fully realized until the moment they were being pulled apart. Seo had whisked him away that day, taking him under the guise of protection, and Jisung had told himself that it was the right choice. She had promised him that it wouldn't be forever. He would only need to lie low for a while, and then things would return to normal.

But that time had never come. Instead, he found himself here, trapped in a gilded cage of her making, unable to reach Minho or anyone else from his old life.

Now, sitting in his dimly lit room, the weight of the hidden laptop pressed down on him like a secret burden. He had seen the plans Seo had laid out for the future, each detail a sinister thread in a tapestry of control and manipulation. The cold glow of the screen illuminated his determined face as he opened the laptop again, the faint sound of the fan humming like a heartbeat in the stillness.

Seo had panicked when she discovered the laptop was missing, her voice laced with thinly veiled anxiety as she'd asked him if he had seen it. "It's just a machine, Auntie," he had replied with feigned casualness, all the while knowing her eyes had been searching for something beyond the surface. He remembered the way her gaze had lingered on him, a predator sniffing for weakness, and how she had discreetly searched his room, pulling back the curtains and rifling through his belongings. But he had hidden it well, under a pile of clothes, deep in the shadows where she couldn't pry.

As he scrolled through the documents again, the horror of Seo's intentions unfolded before him. She planned to manipulate the media to further isolate him, using headlines to paint him as a troubled child in need of her protection. The strategy was clear: alienate him from anyone who could potentially help him escape her clutches. Friends would become strangers, family members would be painted as foes—all for her twisted sense of control.

But among the chilling details of her schemes, was Minho's location. Seo had information on where he was staying—hidden in an apartment far away from their usual places, isolated just like Jisung. There were notes on how to monitor him, to ensure that Minho wouldn't try to reach out or disrupt her plans. Jisung's heart clenched as he saw the surveillance details, the cold, calculating way Seo was keeping tabs on the one person he needed most.

There were also notes on how to deal with any potential threats to her plans—people like Felix and Chan. The thought made bile rise in his throat. Seo had written about how she could turn the media against them, casting them as negative

influences in his life. It was chilling to see the details of how she intended to dismantle his friendships, turning those who cared for him into shadows of doubt.

The most devastating revelation, however, was her plan to solidify her hold on his future. She intended to arrange for him to attend a prestigious school far away from his old life, a move that would strip him of the support system he desperately needed. The note had read like a dagger to his heart: “Separate him from his past; create a new identity that suits my needs.” The words echoed in his mind, a chilling reminder of how she saw him—not as a person with hopes and dreams, but as an asset to be managed.

Jisung’s hands trembled as he absorbed the gravity of her schemes. He felt anger bubbling within him, but it was overshadowed by a desperate resolve. He couldn’t let this happen. He had to gather strength and formulate a plan of his own, one that would turn her manipulations against her.

He thought of his friends, of Minho’s laughter and Felix’s unwavering support. They had once made his life bright, and the idea of losing them to Seo’s machinations was a poison he couldn’t swallow. He envisioned ways to reach out to them, even from the shadows. Each document he studied sparked new ideas, each revelation becoming a stepping stone for his own strategy.

Days turned into a week, and he had become adept at moving stealthily through his aunt’s watchful gaze. Every time she inquired about her laptop, he had maintained his innocent façade, even as he dove deeper into her plans under the cover of night. The laptop became his lifeline, a portal through which he could reclaim his narrative.

In those late-night hours, he plotted his counter-strategies, drawing from the very plans Seo had created to entrap him. He wrote notes, sketched ideas, careful to disguise them as benign distractions to avoid detection. He studied the details of Minho’s location, hoping to use it to find a way to reconnect with him, to tell him the truth without alerting Seo.

One night, as he immersed himself in the labyrinth of Seo’s plans, he felt a spark of clarity. It was time to act—not just to survive, but to fight back. Jisung knew he needed allies and a way to connect with his friends without alerting Seo. Each plan he devised, each tactic he uncovered, brought him closer to freedom.

With the dawn approaching, he closed the laptop and hid it once more, a sense of purpose igniting within him. He would reclaim his life and dismantle the prison Seo had constructed around him. And as he lay in bed, heart racing with the thrill of impending rebellion, he made a silent vow: he would not be her puppet any longer.

Minho—he had to do something. His fingers itched to act, but he knew that any wrong move would alert his aunt. Seo was nothing if not thorough, always watching, always scheming. He couldn’t risk direct action, but there had to be a way to help without drawing attention to himself.

The laptop lay hidden beneath a pile of clothes, its glow still burned into his vision as he closed his eyes for a moment. An idea flickered in his mind—something small but significant. Jisung had seen more than just Minho’s location in those files. There had been bits of information about the people Seo had monitoring Minho. She had hired them through third-party companies, keeping her hands clean while watching Minho from a distance. Jisung’s heart pounded as he recalled the details: security camera footage, tapped phone lines, and even reports about Minho’s daily activities.

It was a lot of data, but there was one crucial thing he had noticed: Seo’s network wasn’t perfect. There were gaps. Places where her eyes couldn’t reach, moments of silence in her otherwise airtight surveillance. She wasn’t omnipotent, just very good at pretending to be.

Jisung threw off the blanket and grabbed the laptop again, opening it to the files he had been studying. He wasn’t a hacker like Seungmin, but he knew enough about navigating systems to make a dent. He sifted through the surveillance logs, scanning for the right opportunity. And then he saw it: a routine gap in the monitoring schedule for the location where Minho was staying. A gap that happened every few days, just long enough for someone to slip through unnoticed.

Jisung knew it wasn’t much, but it could be enough to make a difference.

With a quick but deliberate hand, he opened an anonymous messaging app, careful to bounce the signal through multiple servers to avoid detection. He typed a cryptic message—one that wouldn’t trace back to him, but would give just enough information to the right people.

“Window of Silence. Act Fast. Now or never. Attached Minho’s location”

He didn’t know if it would work, but he sent the message anyway, directing it to a email he had seen listed in some of the files related to his family’s business—a contact that was suspected as his father’s ally, who had ties to some underground networks. Jisung didn’t have proof, but he suspected it to be the one who had been helping him anonymously.

He hit send, heart pounding in his chest, and immediately deleted any trace of the message. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he double-checked everything, erasing his tracks meticulously. Seo was sharp, but she couldn’t possibly trace an anonymous message sent from a disguised signal. He hoped.

With the laptop hidden away once more, Jisung slumped back into his chair. He could only hope that his small effort would reach the right hands. He couldn’t stop thinking about Minho—was he safe? Was he as trapped as Jisung felt here?

Across the city, in a small, nondescript building on the outskirts of town, Minhø's father sat hunched over a map, eyes bloodshot from days of searching. He had known his son was in danger, but every lead had turned into a dead end. Minhø's sudden disappearance had rattled him, and though he had severed ties with his family long ago, he couldn't abandon his son to whatever forces had taken him.

The message flashed onto his screen without warning. Just a few words, barely enough to make sense of, but something about them caught his attention. The cryptic tone, the mention of a window of silence—it made him pause.

His pulse quickened, and without hesitating, he pulled up the coordinates he had been piecing together, running them through the filters he had access to. He cross-referenced the data with the surveillance blind spots his team had been monitoring.

It matched.

A gap in the monitoring—a window of opportunity. It was small, but he had learned long ago that small chances were often the only ones that mattered. Without wasting a moment, he called his allies, alerting them to the gap and the possible location of his son. He was moving within minutes, rushing to exploit the small advantage he had been given.

Minhø's father stood still for a moment longer, staring at the screen, wondering where the message had come from. It didn't matter now. All that mattered was Minhø's safety.

Back in his room, Jisung paced the floor, every second dragging on as he waited for something—anything—to happen. He couldn't know if his message had reached anyone, but deep down, he felt like something had shifted.

A few hours later, Jisung refreshed the website—an underground forum he had been monitoring. His heart stopped when he saw the headline:

"Lee Minhø seen at the outskirts of the city?"

Jisung's breath hitched. He clicked the article, scanning for details. It wasn't perfect, the story was still vague, but one thing was clear: Minhø had escaped. Jisung's message had reached someone.

A wave of relief washed over him, but it was short-lived. If Minhø had been rescued, it would only be a matter of time before Seo realized that something had gone wrong. She would tighten her grip on Jisung, and that meant he had to act fast if he wanted to escape her clutches.

But for now, in the quiet safety of his room, Jisung allowed himself a small, bittersweet smile. He had helped. Unknowingly, maybe, but he had made a difference.

And wherever Minhø was now, Jisung hoped he was safe.

Seo paced in her study, her usually calm facade slipping with every heavy step she took. The tension in the air was palpable, crackling like a live wire. Her brow furrowed as she replayed the events of the last few days in her mind, trying to piece together where she had lost control.

She had been so careful, so meticulous with her planning. Every detail had been accounted for, every possible outcome calculated to ensure her hold over Jisung and the others remained ironclad. But now, something had shifted—Minhø's sudden escape from surveillance had thrown everything off balance.

Her fingers tightened around the edge of her desk. She had ordered the surveillance to be constant, unbroken, and yet there had been a breach. A gap in the watch that coincided with Minhø's disappearance. Someone had acted. Someone had found a way to undermine her control, and she couldn't figure out how it had happened.

Her mind flicked back to Jisung. She had noticed small changes in his behavior recently—nothing overt, but enough to put her on edge. He had always been obedient, willing to believe in her carefully constructed persona of the caring aunt, but lately, there had been a distance in his eyes, a hesitation in his responses. He wasn't the same naïve boy she had molded and manipulated for years.

And then, the laptop.

She had panicked when she couldn't find it, convinced that something was wrong. Her first thought had been Jisung—he must have taken it. She had discreetly searched his room, combing through his belongings with a practiced hand, but there had been no sign of it. Nothing. She had dismissed the idea at the time, trying to calm her racing thoughts, but now, in light of Minhø's escape, she wasn't so sure.

Had Jisung found a way to use her own tools against her? The thought gnawed at her, a slow-growing certainty that unsettled her deeply. She had been so focused on controlling the external threats—Minhø, Felix, anyone who could pull Jisung away from her influence—but she hadn't fully considered the possibility that Jisung could be working against her from within.

She stopped pacing, her eyes narrowing as she thought back to that day. Jisung had been too calm when she had asked about the missing laptop, his answers too measured. She had dismissed it as him growing weary of their situation, but what if he was more involved than she had imagined?

Seo clenched her jaw, a slow, creeping fury building inside her. She had underestimated him. That much was clear now. But it wasn't too late. She still had control over him—or at least, she would make sure it seemed that way.

Her phone buzzed on the desk, breaking her out of her thoughts. It was a message from one of her contacts, confirming that Minhø's escape had been orchestrated by an unknown party, but there were no leads. No traces left behind. Whoever had intervened had covered their tracks well.

She cursed under her breath.

Who was it? Who had the resources and the knowledge to outmaneuver her? It couldn't be Minhø—he didn't have the means. And if it was Jisung...well, she would deal with him soon enough. He was still under her roof, still close enough to control if she played her cards right.

Taking a deep breath, Seo composed herself. She was not someone who allowed setbacks to derail her plans. No, this was just another challenge, another piece of the puzzle she needed to solve.

She would keep an even closer eye on Jisung, but not too close. She couldn't afford to tip her hand just yet. If he had the laptop, if he had been communicating with the outside world, she needed to make sure he didn't know that she suspected anything.

For now, she would let him think he was still safe, still in control. But when the time came, she would remind him just how deeply woven her influence was. He wouldn't escape her grasp so easily—not like Minhø.

And as for Minhø...she would find him. No matter how far he ran, no matter who was helping him.

Seo sat down at her desk, her fingers hovering over the keyboard as she began typing out a series of instructions to her contacts. She had more than enough resources at her disposal to track down a single boy and whoever dared to interfere with her plans.

Minhø's escape was just a blip, a temporary setback. She had spent too long building this empire of control to let one mistake unravel everything. Jisung was still hers. And soon, he would be reminded of that in no uncertain terms.

She smiled to herself, a cold, calculating smile that held no warmth. The game wasn't over yet.

In fact, it had only just begun.

Notes:

hides from Jeongin stans

It had to be him. He is an actor in this story for a reason after all.

If you hadn't guessed, we are heading towards the end of the story. Only a few more chapters left. If you are following this story, then you must know that I do not have a posting schedule.

I'm working on another College AU Minsung that I will be posting soon.

In the Shadows of Haven was supposed to be the college AU with Murder mystery but the story took a path of its own and refused to listen to me after Minsung ran off from the detectives.

So, the new fic, it will be a proper college AU. I do not have many chapters written for it but I'll let you guys know soon.

Chapter 24 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/150896485>)

Felix's pulse raced as he watched Seungmin's fingers fly across the keyboard, unlocking layer after layer of the encrypted files. But something gnawed at him—a gut feeling he couldn't shake. The deeper Seungmin dug, the more Felix felt like they were spiraling into something far bigger than they could handle.

Just as Seungmin was about to open the final file, Felix's hand shot forward, grabbing the USB out of the laptop before anyone could react.

"Felix, what the hell—?" Hyunjin blurted, eyes wide with confusion.

Seungmin froze, his gaze flicking from the empty port where the USB had been to Felix, an unreadable expression crossing his face. "What are you doing?" he asked, his tone controlled but sharp.

Felix gripped the USB tightly, his chest heaving. "I can't—I need to do this myself. I can't." His voice trembled, betraying the turmoil churning inside him.

Hyunjin stood up abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor. "Felix, are you serious? This could be our only chance to find Jisung and Minhø! You can't just walk away with it."

"I know," Felix said, his voice shaking but resolute. "But this... this is bigger than just us. That guy in the alley, the files... we don't even know who's really behind all this, and I—I don't know if we can trust anyone right now."

Seungmin remained seated, his expression unreadable but his eyes sharp, watching Felix carefully. “You think you can figure this out alone?” he asked, voice low. There wasn’t any mockery, just a calm, unsettling certainty.

Felix nodded, taking a step back. “I don’t know. But I have to try.”

Hyunjin’s frustration boiled over. “You’re not making sense! Felix, we’re all in this together. Don’t do this alone!”

Felix’s throat tightened. “It’s not about not trusting you guys. I just... I need space to think. To figure out what’s really going on.”

Seungmin stood slowly, closing his laptop. “If you walk away with that, you’ll be cutting us out. Whatever happens next, you’re on your own.”

Felix swallowed hard, his mind spinning. He didn’t want to isolate himself, but he felt cornered—like something dark was lurking just out of sight, waiting for them to fall into a trap. “I’m not cutting you out,” he said, his voice quiet. “I just need time. I’ll reach out when I’m ready.”

Hyunjin stepped forward, his voice breaking. “Felix, please—don’t shut us out like this. We’re supposed to find them together.”

Felix hesitated, feeling the weight of Hyunjin’s words, the raw pain behind them. He turned to Seungmin, who was watching him with cool detachment. Felix could see the questions in his eyes, the unspoken challenge.

“I’m sorry,” Felix muttered, backing toward the door. “But I need to do this. I’ll... I’ll let you know what I find.”

Without waiting for a response, Felix turned and bolted out of the café, the USB clutched tightly in his hand, the weight of everything pressing down on him.

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Felix sat on a park bench, heart racing, the USB heavy in his pocket. The words of the hooded figure echoed in his mind, wrapping around his thoughts like a tightening noose: *“Not everyone around you is on your side.”*

Could he really trust his friends?

He had always believed in their bond, their camaraderie forged through laughter and shared experiences. They had been through so much together, weathering storms that threatened to tear them apart. But now, doubt seeped in like a poison, dark and insidious. It twisted in his gut, making him feel queasy.

Felix pulled out the USB and plugged it into his phone, watching as the screen flickered to life. He felt his pulse quicken with anticipation, but it was quickly overshadowed by dread as the decrypted files appeared. His breath caught in his throat when he saw it—coordinates: *12.92011, 143.8645*. A chill ran through him, freezing him in place. What lay at those coordinates? A safe haven for Jisung and Minho, or a carefully laid trap waiting to ensnare him?

How could he have been so naive? He berated himself for thinking he could trust anyone without question. The realization hit him hard: he had let his guard down, blinded by the hope of finding his friends. He felt a rush of frustration boiling inside him, mixing with the anxiety that clung to him like a shadow.

Felix’s thoughts spiraled. Maybe his friends hadn’t betrayed him, but what if there was a deeper betrayal at play? What if someone had manipulated them all? The stranger’s warning echoed ominously, and he felt the weight of those words crashing down around him. The fear of the unknown gnawed at him, making it hard to breathe.

Felix stared at the coordinates on his phone screen, his heart pounding in his chest. The decrypted files had been a maze of encrypted text and locked data, and after all their digging, all that remained was a single location. His mind raced with questions as he committed the numbers to memory. What was waiting for him there? Could this be a clue to finding Minho and Jisung? Or was this another dead end in a string of misdirections?

Without a second thought, Felix stood up from the park bench and began walking, his breath shallow as the evening air chilled around him. He couldn’t shake the sense of urgency clawing at his insides. Something told him that this was it—the moment where everything could finally break open.

Hours passed, and Felix found himself in front of a secluded cabin, its wooden exterior illuminated only by the fading light of dusk. His nerves spiked as he approached the place, the coordinates guiding him exactly here. He wasn’t sure what he had expected, but the sight of the remote house in the middle of nowhere made his stomach tighten. The cabin seemed almost too quiet, too still, like a scene pulled from a dream he couldn’t fully grasp.

He paused at the door, hesitating as his hand hovered over the handle. Could this really be where Minho was? Could Jisung be here too? The thought of seeing them again—alive, after all these months—made Felix’s chest ache. And yet, the fear of what might greet him on the other side of the door was just as strong.

Swallowing his fear, Felix knocked. His knuckles hit the wood with more force than he intended, the sound reverberating in the silence of the surrounding woods. Seconds stretched into what felt like an eternity before the door creaked open.

Standing there was a man Felix didn’t recognize—at first. His face was worn, lines etched deep into his skin as if the weight of the world had pressed on him for years. He looked at Felix with an expression that was hard to decipher—surprise, maybe, but also something else. Something like expectation.

The man's eyes narrowed slightly as he stepped aside, gesturing for Felix to come in. "I've been expecting you," he said, his voice rough but calm, as if he had been waiting for this moment for a long time.

Felix blinked, the words hanging in the air, confusing him. Expecting him? How could this stranger possibly know he was coming?

As Felix stepped inside, his gaze roamed the dimly lit interior, taking in the simple furnishings and the flickering light from a nearby lamp. The cabin smelled of wood and something faintly medicinal, like antiseptic or old bandages. A shiver ran down Felix's spine. He hadn't come this far to turn back now, but the tension in the air felt thick, like there was something here that he wasn't prepared for.

It was then that he remembered, the photograph from Chan's safehouse. His breath caught in his throat. The man standing before him wasn't just a stranger.

"Y-You're..." Felix stammered, his mind racing as recognition dawned. "You're Minho's father."

The man didn't deny it. He simply nodded, a small, sad smile playing at the edges of his mouth. Felix's head spun as everything clicked into place. The stranger who had anonymously given him the USB—the one who had set him on this path—was none other than Mr. Lee. Minho's father had been the one to guide him here all along.

But why? Felix felt a wave of confusion wash over him. Why had Mr. Lee gone to such lengths to stay anonymous? Why hadn't he just reached out direct? The questions swirled in Felix's mind, creating a dizzying blur of anxiety and hope.

Before Felix could voice his thoughts, he heard movement from the back of the cabin. A figure stepped forward from the shadows, and Felix's world seemed to stop. It was Minho.

Felix's heart surged, tears immediately welling up in his eyes as he took in the sight of his friend. Minho looked thinner, paler than Felix remembered, but he was alive. Felix let out a choked breath, his chest tightening with overwhelming emotion. He could barely move, could barely breathe.

"Minho..." Felix whispered, his voice breaking.

Minho's eyes met his, wide and filled with disbelief. He looked as if he was seeing a ghost, his own emotions visibly rising to the surface. "Felix?" His voice cracked as he spoke, as if he couldn't believe his own eyes. In a matter of seconds, Minho crossed the room, closing the distance between them in a single heartbeat.

Without thinking, Felix threw his arms around Minho, pulling him into a fierce embrace. The weight of everything hit him all at once—the months of searching, the nights spent wondering if Minho was even still alive, the suffocating fear that they might never see each other again. Felix's tears fell freely as he clung to Minho, his body trembling with relief and disbelief.

Minho wrapped his arms around Felix just as tightly, burying his face in Felix's shoulder. He didn't speak for a long moment, and neither did Felix. There were no words that could capture the flood of emotion, the relief of finally being together after months of terror and uncertainty. All Felix could do was hold Minho, as if letting go would make him disappear again.

When they finally pulled apart, both of them were wiping away tears, their breathing uneven. Felix looked at Minho, searching his friend's face for answers. "Where have you been? What happened to you? We've been searching for you for months."

Minho took a shaky breath, glancing briefly at his father before turning back to Felix. "I... I don't even know where to begin. So much has happened. We—Jisung and I—we thought we could trust her."

"Her?" Felix asked, confused.

Minho's father, who had been silent until now, spoke up, his voice heavy. "Seo Ji Young."

Felix froze, the name ringing familiar in his mind. Seo Ji Young. He had heard that name before. Slowly, the pieces began to fall into place, and when the realization hit, it was like a punch to the gut.

"Wait, what? Jisung's aunt?" Felix's voice was thick with disbelief. He looked from Minho to Mr. Lee, trying to process what he was hearing.

Minho nodded grimly. "Jisung trusted her. She was supposed to help us... but then everything went wrong."

Felix felt his stomach drop as the full weight of the situation settled over him. Jisung's aunt had been behind all of this? The person Jisung had trusted the most, the person they thought was on their side? His mind reeled, overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the betrayal.

Minho continued, his voice shaking slightly. "She took Jisung away... two months ago. I haven't heard from him since."

Felix felt the world tilt around him, the room spinning as he tried to grasp what Minho was saying. Jisung was still missing? And he had gone with his aunt, the very person who had betrayed them? He couldn't believe it. The shock and confusion clouded his thoughts, and all he could feel was a deep, gnawing fear for Jisung's safety.

Minho's voice wavered as he spoke. "I don't know where she took him, Felix."

Mr. Lee sighed heavily, his expression dark. "I rescued Minho from her. We knew we couldn't trust anyone else... not after what she did."

Felix's mind raced, the flood of information overwhelming him. The name Seo Ji Young echoed in his head, bringing with it a fresh wave of dread. How could this have happened? How could Jisung have been taken by his own family—by someone they had all believed was looking out for him?

The room felt suffocating, the weight of the truth pressing down on Felix's chest. He had come here hoping for answers, but all he had found were more questions. Jisung was still out there, and now they knew the enemy they were facing was someone much closer than they had ever imagined.

Felix's hands trembled as he tried to steady his breathing. "We have to find him, Minho. We can't let her... we can't let her keep him."

Minho nodded, his expression resolute. "We will. We're not giving up."

Felix looked at Mr. Lee, who met his gaze with an intensity that sent a shiver down his spine. "We're in this together now," Mr. Lee said, his voice firm. "But we have to be careful. She's dangerous."

Felix looked between Minho and Mr. Lee, the weight of the situation settling over him like a heavy fog. His heart was still racing from the unexpected reunion with Minho, and his mind struggled to process everything that had just been revealed. How could things have gone so wrong? And how had Minho's father known where to find him?

Felix broke the silence. "How did you know where Minho was?" he asked, unable to shake the question. He had to know. Minho had been missing for months—vanished without a trace.

Mr. Lee exhaled slowly, his expression somber. "I didn't... at first. I spent every day searching for him after he disappeared. I used every connection I had, followed every lead, but I kept coming up with nothing. For months, it was like he vanished into thin air."

Minho shifted uncomfortably, avoiding his father's gaze. The months he'd been missing were clearly painful for him to relive, and Felix felt his own stomach churn with the thought of what Minho had endured during that time.

"I thought I'd lost him for good," Mr. Lee continued, his voice cracking slightly. "Then, yesterday, I got an anonymous message on my phone. It had no sender information, no name—just a set of coordinates." He paused, looking directly at Felix. "Those coordinates led me to the place where I found Minho."

Felix felt a chill creep down his spine. "Anonymous?" he echoed, his voice tight. What was it with all these secret messages? "Do you know who sent it?"

Mr. Lee shook his head. "I still don't know. The message appeared out of nowhere, and I tried tracing it, but it led to a dead end. Whoever sent it wanted to stay hidden."

Felix clenched his fists, frustrated by the lack of answers. Whoever was pulling the strings clearly had access to powerful resources. "But why then?" Felix asked, his voice filled with urgency. "Why did they wait until that specific day to tell you where Minho was? Why not sooner?"

Mr. Lee's expression darkened. "I've asked myself the same question every day since I got Minho back. I don't know why. Maybe it was a game for them. Maybe it was part of something bigger. All I know is, the message came, and when I followed it, I found him."

Felix turned his gaze to Minho, who sat in silence, his eyes downcast. Felix could sense the exhaustion, the layers of trauma that Minho had been carrying since everything started.

Felix continued, "Why give me the USB? Why ask me to come here?"

Mr. Lee's face softened, "After I got Minho here, I wanted him to have a familiar face around after everything he has gone through. I know you will always stay by his and Jisung's side."

Felix's face softened. "Thank you for trusting me"

Jeongin leaned against the wall of his dimly lit apartment, a familiar weight pressing down on his chest. The silence was deafening, a stark contrast to the chaos swirling in his mind. He glanced at his phone, the screen dark and uninviting, a reminder of the calls he had avoided and the messages left unanswered. Trapped in a web of lies and deceit he had woven himself, each strand was a reminder of the choices that haunted him day and night.

For years, he had been Jisung's best friend, their bond forged through laughter and shared dreams. But everything changed the moment Seo Ji Young entered their lives. Charming and persuasive, she had been an undeniable force. Jeongin had thought he could resist her influence, brush off her suggestions as mere whims. Yet as time passed, he found himself ensnared, trapped by threats that gnawed at the edges of his resolve.

It had started innocently enough. Seo approached him under the guise of friendship, cloaking her intentions in a veil of concern for Jisung. Jeongin had been naïve, believing her words and thinking she genuinely cared. But soon, he discovered the truth—the true depth of Seo's manipulations and the lengths to which she would go to get what she wanted.

Threatening his family and his burgeoning career, she turned his world upside down, leaving him feeling powerless to escape her grasp.

Now, as he thought back on the last three months, a familiar pit of guilt formed in his stomach. Jisung and Minhø were missing—vanished without a trace. Jeongin knew they had gone with Seo, knew the danger they were in, but had pretended otherwise. Each day since their disappearance had been a painful reminder of his betrayal. He had watched as Felix and Hyunjin searched frantically for answers, their trust in him unshaken, twisting the knife deeper into his gut.

Frustration boiled beneath the surface as he ran a hand through his hair. How could he continue to lie? How could he pretend everything was normal when he knew the truth? Each time Felix called him, seeking support and friendship, Jeongin felt like a fraud. He wanted to scream, to confess everything, but the fear of losing everything—his family, his career—held him captive. The guilt clawed at him, reminding him that he had not only lost his best friend but had played a part in his downfall.

Just then, his phone buzzed, and he picked it up, heart racing. It was a message from Seo.

Seo

4:20 PM: *We need to talk. Now.*

A chill ran down his spine. He knew what she wanted—information and assurance that he was still on her side. He felt like a marionette, dancing to the tune of her manipulation, but what choice did he have?

Jeongin typed a quick response, his fingers trembling slightly.

Jeongin

4:21 PM: *Where?*

As he awaited her reply, memories flooded back—Jisung's laughter, the way they dreamed about the future and a life free from fear. Now, everything felt tainted, and he wondered if they would ever return to that innocent time. Pushing those thoughts away, he reminded himself that dwelling on them wouldn't change anything. He had to stay focused, stay vigilant.

Finally, Seo's response came through.

Seo

4:21 PM: *Meet me at the usual spot. Don't be late.*

The tension in his chest tightened. "The usual spot" was a secluded café where they had first met. Jeongin knew that whatever Seo wanted to discuss could have serious consequences, not just for him, but for Jisung and Minhø as well.

With a heavy heart, Jeongin grabbed his jacket and headed out the door. He took a deep breath, steeling himself for whatever lay ahead. He had to play his part, keep up the facade just a little longer. But deep down, guilt festered, growing like a dark shadow, reminding him of the friend he had betrayed and the lengths to which he would go to protect his own.

As he walked toward the café, the weight of his choices bore down on him. He couldn't help but wonder if he would ever find a way to make things right and be the friend Jisung deserved.

Stepping into the café, his heart raced as he spotted Seo sitting at their usual table. She was hunched over her phone, her fingers tapping furiously against the screen. The tension in the air was palpable as he approached, and he felt his stomach twist with apprehension, knowing she would likely demand answers he wasn't prepared to give.

"Nice of you to finally show up," Seo said, her voice clipped as she glanced up at him. Irritation and anger danced in her expression, and Jeongin's pulse quickened.

"Sorry, I got caught up with some auditions," he said, trying to keep his tone neutral. "What's going on?"

Seo leaned closer, her eyes narrowing. "Minhø has escaped."

Jeongin's heart sank. Part of him felt a surge of elation at Minhø's freedom, but the weight of guilt settled heavily on his chest. "How do you know?" he asked, feigning ignorance.

"Are you seriously asking me that?" she snapped, her frustration boiling over. "You haven't brought me any information about his contacts. You're supposed to be keeping tabs on your friends!"

A knot tightened in Jeongin's stomach at her words. He hadn't been able to watch his friends closely enough since Jisung and Minhø had gone missing. The helplessness weighed down on him, a reminder of the manipulation he had endured.

"I—I didn't know," he stammered, trying to keep the tremor from his voice. "I thought—"

"You thought what?" Seo interrupted, her voice rising. "You thought you could sit back and let this unfold? You're supposed to have eyes on them, and you're failing me!"

As she spoke, Jeongin's mind raced. He knew she was angry, but part of him was also relieved that Minhø had managed to escape. This could be an opportunity to right his wrongs. Yet, he couldn't afford to let her see even a hint of that. If she knew he was feeling anything but dread, it could cost him dearly.

Seo's expression hardened. "This isn't a game, Jeongin. If you don't get me the information I need, you'll lose everything. Your career, your friends—everything you've worked for will go up in flames. Right now, you're letting me down."

His heart ached at her words. The guilt washed over him like a wave. He had spent so long trying to protect his family and his career, but the cost had been his integrity. Now, standing before Seo, he felt more trapped than ever.

He had witnessed the toll this situation had taken on Jisung and Minhoo, the fear and confusion that surrounded them. Jeongin could hardly bear to think about the consequences of Seo's actions if Minhoo reached out to any of their other friends. It could unravel everything.

"What if I can get you the information you need?" Jeongin offered cautiously, trying to steer the conversation in a direction that would allow him to buy some time.

Seo narrowed her eyes, clearly suspicious. "You better not be wasting my time, Jeongin. I'll be expecting results. Minhoo is already a loose end, and if he starts talking, it will jeopardize everything we've built. You're supposed to know these people. I need you to find out who he's talking to."

"Yeah, of course," he replied, swallowing hard. "I'll do what I can."

As she stood to leave, Jeongin felt a surge of determination. He could no longer sit idly by while Seo manipulated everything around him. He had to act, to take control of his fate. A flicker of hope ignited within him at the thought of Minhoo's escape, but it was quickly overshadowed by the reality of his own choices.

As Jeongin walked away from the café, his mind was a storm of conflicting thoughts and emotions. The city around him buzzed with life, but he felt detached, as if he were moving through a world of shadows. Each step he took was heavy with the weight of his decision. On one hand, he felt the need to protect himself—to bow down to Seo and adhere to her demands. She was a force that had already upended his life, and to oppose her felt like inviting chaos he couldn't control.

But on the other hand, the idea of bringing Seo down gnawed at him, a siren song luring him to the edge of freedom. He imagined a world where he could be honest with his friends, where he wouldn't have to look over his shoulder or live in constant fear of Seo's wrath. The thought of walking into the police station and laying bare everything she had done felt intoxicating, a release from the chains that bound him.

What if I could finally escape her grasp?

The dilemma twisted in his gut. Jeongin could picture the look of betrayal in Felix's eyes, the confusion on Hyunjin's face, if they learned he had been complicit in their friends' suffering. Would they ever forgive him? Or would they cast him aside, just like he had cast aside his integrity? The fear of their judgment felt like a suffocating blanket, pressing down harder as he neared the station.

But if I don't act, if I continue to play her game, what will happen to Jisung and Minhoo?

Jeongin's heart raced as he thought about Jisung—his best friend trapped in Seo's clutches, unaware of the true depths of her cruelty. If he stayed silent, Seo could easily tip off the authorities or manipulate the narrative, putting Jisung's life in even greater jeopardy. *Could he live with that?*

As he walked, a small group of fans approached, their eyes lighting up when they recognized him. "Oh my God, it's Jeongin!" one of them squealed, pulling out her phone. "Can we take a picture with you?"

The moment pulled him from his dark thoughts, and for a brief second, he felt the warmth of being in the spotlight. He smiled, the familiar rush of adrenaline surging through him as he posed for a few selfies. The laughter and excitement of the fans momentarily distracted him from the turmoil inside.

"Thank you so much!" another fan gushed, her voice filled with adoration. "We love you! Can I get your autograph?"

As he signed her notebook, Jeongin couldn't help but think about his career—the opportunities he had, the dreams he was chasing. Each signature felt like a reminder of the life he had built, a life that could all come crashing down if Seo discovered his plan. *What would happen if he lost everything?* The glimmer of fame and success had always been intoxicating, but now it felt heavy with the weight of his choices.

"Thanks for being so sweet!" he said, forcing a smile even as the guilt twisted in his gut. As the fans walked away, he felt the momentary joy dissipate, replaced by the harsh reality of his situation. He was grateful for their support, but he couldn't shake the feeling that they would hate him just as much when they discover his deception.

Was he really worthy of their admiration when he was hiding such a dark secret? What would they think if they knew the truth about Seo and what he had done?

Could he risk it all?

The internal conflict raged within him, and Jeongin felt as if he were standing on a precipice, staring down into an abyss of uncertainty. *Could he find a way to protect himself while also doing the right thing?* Or was he doomed to be a pawn in Seo's game, forever circling the drain of his own guilt?

As he stepped into the police station, the sterile smell of antiseptic and the buzz of activity surrounded him. Officers moved about, absorbed in their own worlds, and he felt an odd sense of camaraderie with them—a longing for justice that felt out of reach.

What if they see through me? What if they sense my fear?

Jeongin shook his head, pushing the doubts aside as he approached the desk. The officer looked up, raising an eyebrow at him. "Can I help you?"

"I—I need to speak with someone about... about a missing persons case," Jeongin stammered, his voice barely above a whisper. The words felt heavy on his tongue, as if he were speaking a truth that could change everything.

The officer nodded, motioning for him to follow. Jeongin's heart raced as he walked through the station, every step echoing with the weight of his choices. This could be the turning point he desperately needed, but it felt like standing on a tightrope over a chasm, ready to fall at any moment.

As they reached a small room, the officer gestured for him to sit. Jeongin took a deep breath, his palms sweaty against his jeans. The door closed behind him with a soft click, isolating him in this moment of truth.

"Can you tell me your name and what you know?" the officer prompted, looking at him expectantly.

Jeongin opened his mouth, but no words came out. The internal conflict roared back to life, tearing at his resolve.

Could he do this? Could he really lay everything on the line?

A vision of Jisung's face flashed in his mind, filled with trust and loyalty, and the guilt that followed was suffocating. *If he stayed silent, he was betraying everything they had ever built together.*

But what if Seo found out? What if she retaliated? Jeongin could already picture her fury—an unbridled storm that would take everything from him. *He had to protect himself, had to survive.*

"Just tell them what you know, and you can find a way to protect yourself later," he whispered to himself, steeling his resolve.

"Sir, are you okay?" the officer asked, concern etched on his face.

Jeongin met the officer's gaze, and for a moment, he felt a flicker of determination ignite within him. He could either continue to play Seo's game or begin to reclaim his life. It was a choice between fear and freedom.

"Actually," he said slowly, each word heavy with consequence, "I have information about Han Jisung and Lee Minhoo."

And with that admission, Jeongin felt the walls of his self-imposed prison begin to crack. The path ahead was fraught with danger, but he was ready to take the first step toward redemption.

Jeongin took a deep breath, feeling the weight of his words settle heavily in the small room. Choi Seungcheol, the officer seated across from him, leaned forward, his attention fully on Jeongin, waiting for him to continue. Seungcheol had been involved in the investigation surrounding Jisung and Minhoo's disappearance, and the gravity of the situation wasn't lost on him. Jeongin's heart raced, each beat echoing in his ears like a drumroll for the confession he was about to make.

"I—I know where they are," Jeongin said, his voice trembling slightly. "I know what's been happening with Jisung and Minhoo."

Seungcheol's expression shifted from concern to focus, a keen interest glimmering in his eyes. "Can you tell me more? What do you know?"

Jeongin swallowed hard, feeling the urgency of the moment. This was it. This was his chance to come clean, to finally shake off the chains of deception that had bound him for so long. But the specter of Seo loomed large in his mind, a reminder of the consequences he might face.

"I've been friends with Jisung and Minhoo for years. Three months ago, they disappeared after going with a woman named Seo Ji Young," he began, his voice gaining strength as he spoke. "She's been controlling them, and I was supposed to keep tabs on Jisung for her. I—I thought I could protect my career, my family, but I can't do this anymore."

Seungcheol nodded, encouraging him to continue. "Go on. What do you know about Seo Ji Young and her plans?"

Jeongin felt the rush of adrenaline as he recounted everything he knew—how Seo had manipulated him into spying on Jisung, how she had threatened his family and career to keep him in line.

"She's dangerous," Jeongin insisted, his voice rising. "She's not just a friend; she's a master manipulator. If she finds out I talked to you, she will come after me and everyone I care about. But I can't sit back anymore while Jisung and Minhoo are in danger. They deserve better. The murder that Minhoo was involved in, was a setup by Seo Ji Young. She orchestrated everything to incriminate Minhoo."

Seungcheol's interest peaked. "Do you have any tangible proof? Anything that can substantiate your claims?"

Jeongin hesitated, the weight of his confession hanging in the air. He had been so consumed by fear and guilt that he had never thought to gather anything to back up his claims. But then he remembered the small flash drive he had hidden away, something he had taken when she wasn't around during one of his visits to Seo's apartment.

"Yes," Jeongin replied, feeling a spark of hope ignite within him. "I have something. It's a flash drive I took from Seo's place. I didn't know what it was at the time, but I thought it could be useful. It contains details about the murder scene and may reveal the actual culprit."

"Get it," Seungcheol urged, his tone serious. "That could be vital."

With his heart racing, Jeongin pulled out his phone and navigated to a secure app he had set up to store important files. He had saved the contents of the flash drive onto his phone just in case he ever needed it. He quickly sent the officer a secure link to access the files, his hands trembling with anticipation.

As he waited, he felt a mixture of fear and determination. This was the moment he had been waiting for, a chance to take control of his life and confront the darkness that had threatened to consume him for too long. But doubt crept in—*was he truly ready for this? Could he risk everything, including his friends' safety?*

Jeongin continued, "I just sent it over. It has everything I found on that flash drive—documents, emails, things that might connect Seo to the murder and Jisung and Minhoo's disappearance."

Seungecheol's expression shifted to one of concern. "That's crucial information, Jeongin. If we can tie Seo to the murder and their kidnapping, it will strengthen our case significantly. But we need you to be careful. If she discovers that you're cooperating with us..."

"I know," Jeongin said, a steely resolve settling within him. "I'll be careful. I can't let her hurt Jisung or Minhoo any longer."

As he spoke, Jeongin felt a flicker of hope ignite in his chest. Perhaps, just perhaps, this was the turning point they all needed. But as he glanced out the window, a gnawing worry crept into his mind. *What if Seo was already onto him? What if this was the beginning of the end?*

He couldn't afford to dwell on those fears. He had to stay focused. They were fighting for their friends and their futures.

He looked back at Seungecheol, determination flooding his veins. The time for deception was over. It was time to reclaim his life.

Chapter 25 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/150924355>)

Felix leaned back against the cushions of the couch, feeling the warmth of the late evening sun filtering through the kitchen window. The aroma of sizzling vegetables and spices wafted through the air, mingling with the faint sound of laughter from Minhoo and his father, Mr. Lee, as they prepared dinner together. It was a simple moment, yet Felix found comfort in the domestic scene, a reminder of normalcy amid the chaos that had engulfed their lives.

Minhoo, with his apron tied loosely around his waist, was animatedly discussing a recipe he had found a few months ago, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. Mr. Lee listened attentively, occasionally chiming in with tips and tricks he had learned over the years. Watching them, Felix felt a sense of warmth spreading through him, a small beacon of hope amidst the dark uncertainty that loomed over them.

Just then, his phone buzzed, breaking the tranquility of the moment. Felix glanced at the screen, his heart skipping a beat when he saw Jeongin's name flashing back at him. With a quick motion, he answered the call, "Jeongin? Hey, what's up?"

"Hey, Felix," Jeongin's voice came through the line, sounding tired and strained. There was a hesitation in his tone, like he was carrying the weight of something heavy. "Can we meet? I—I need to talk to you. It's important."

Felix glanced toward the kitchen where Minhoo and his father were still chatting and cooking. He bit his lip, conflicted. Something in Jeongin's voice felt off, like the weariness was deeper than just exhaustion—it sounded like regret.

"Where?" Felix asked, still unsure of where this conversation was headed. He stood up, catching Minhoo's eye. Minhoo raised an eyebrow in silent question, but Felix mouthed, "Jeongin," and Minhoo's expression immediately darkened with concern.

"I'll text you the address," Jeongin said softly. "Just...please come. I owe you the truth."

Felix's heart sank. The truth.

After he hung up, Felix relayed the conversation to Minhoo and his father. "Jeongin wants to meet. He sounds... off. Tired." He didn't add the rest of his fears—the way his gut twisted with a premonition that whatever Jeongin had to say wasn't going to be good.

Minhoo exchanged a look with his father. "You should go," Minhoo said carefully, wiping his hands on a towel. "But be cautious. If he's involved with anything shady..."

Felix nodded. "I will. I'll be careful."

An hour later, Felix sat across from Jeongin in a quiet café, concern etched across his face. Jeongin looked awful, far from his usual bright self. His eyes were bloodshot, dark circles bruising his face, and his hands trembled as he stirred his coffee. The sight alone made Felix's stomach churn with worry.

"What's going on, Jeongin?" Felix asked gently, leaning forward. "You sounded like you have something big to say. Are you okay?"

Jeongin didn't meet his gaze. Instead, he stared down into his coffee cup as if it held all the answers. His lips trembled as he spoke. "I'm not okay, Felix. I—I've been keeping something from you. Something big. I can't keep hiding it."

Felix frowned, his heartbeat quickening, but he tried to remain calm. "What do you mean?"

Jeongin finally lifted his gaze, and the look in his eyes was filled with such guilt and dread that it made Felix's chest tighten. "Seo Ji Young," Jeongin whispered, barely audible. "She's the one behind everything. Jisung and Minho's disappearance, the setup, everything. And I—I've been working for her."

The words hit Felix like a punch to the gut. He blinked, trying to process what Jeongin had just said. "What?" His voice came out strained, a mixture of confusion and disbelief. "What do you mean you've been working for her?"

Jeongin took a deep, shaky breath, his hands trembling harder. "I didn't want to, Felix. But she—she threatened me. My family, my career—she said she'd ruin everything if I didn't cooperate. I was supposed to keep an eye on Jisung for her. And when Minho got involved... it all spiraled out of control."

Felix stared at Jeongin, the concern he'd felt slowly morphing into something darker. His heart pounded in his chest, anger simmering beneath the surface. "You've been spying on us?" His voice rose, sharp and raw with disbelief. "On Jisung? On Minho? *For her?*"

Jeongin flinched at the sharpness in Felix's tone, but he pressed on, his voice shaking. "I didn't want to, Felix. I swear. I was stuck—I didn't know how to get out."

The anger inside Felix flared. His vision blurred, not from tears but from the sheer force of his rising rage. He gripped the edge of the table tightly, his knuckles white. "All this time," he whispered, his voice trembling with emotion. "You've been working for the person who's been hurting them? And you didn't *say* anything? Not once?"

"I'm sorry," Jeongin choked out, his voice breaking as tears spilled down his cheeks. "I didn't know what to do."

"*Sorry?*" Felix spat, his voice shaking with disbelief. "You've been betraying us this whole time, and now you're saying you didn't know what to do?"

Jeongin's tears fell freely now, his hands shaking as he tried to reach for Felix. "I didn't want this. I never wanted this."

Felix recoiled, pulling his hands away. The weight of the betrayal pressed down on him like a suffocating blanket. Every laugh, every conversation, every shared moment—it all felt tainted now, twisted by the truth of Jeongin's betrayal.

"You betrayed them, Jeongin. You betrayed *us*," Felix said, his voice heavy with anger and hurt. He felt like he couldn't breathe, like the air was too thick to inhale.

Jeongin broke down, sobbing into his hands, but Felix could no longer feel the sympathy that had brought him here. Every fiber of his being wanted to scream, to rage at the friend who had become his enemy.

Felix stood up abruptly, his chest tight, his vision still blurred by the weight of everything he'd just learned. "I don't know if I can ever forgive you for this," he whispered harshly. "I don't know if any of us can."

Without another word, Felix turned and walked out of the café, his heart shattered into a thousand pieces. The night air hit him like a wall, cold and unforgiving, but he didn't stop. He couldn't. There was no comfort to be found, not after this.

Felix barely remembered how he got back to his dorm. His mind was a blur, replaying Jeongin's words over and over, the betrayal sinking deeper with every step. When he finally reached the familiar door, he fumbled for his keys, his hands trembling. Pushing it open, he stepped inside, feeling the weight of exhaustion settle into his bones.

The dorm was quiet, save for the soft hum of the fan in the corner. But the moment Felix entered, Hyunjin was on his feet, crossing the room in an instant. His face was etched with worry, and Felix knew he'd been waiting for him—probably since he'd taken off that morning with the USB.

"Felix, where have you been?" Hyunjin asked, his voice tight with concern. He reached out, his hand hovering near Felix's shoulder but not quite touching him yet. "You didn't answer any of my calls, and you've been gone for hours."

Felix stood there, frozen, trying to find the words. But nothing came. The emotions he had been holding at bay—anger, betrayal, guilt—started crashing down on him all at once. His chest felt tight, his vision blurry. He couldn't even begin to explain what had happened.

Hyunjin took a step closer, his brows knitting together in confusion. "Felix? What happened?"

And then, without warning, the dam broke.

Felix's breath hitched as a sob tore through him, his legs buckling beneath the weight of it all. Before he could fall, Hyunjin was there, catching him, pulling him into his arms. Felix buried his face in Hyunjin's chest, gripping the fabric of his shirt as if it was the only thing keeping him grounded.

"Hey, hey, I've got you," Hyunjin whispered, his voice soft but filled with concern. He gently guided Felix to the couch, holding him close, his hands rubbing soothing circles on Felix's back. "It's okay. Whatever it is, we'll figure it out. Just breathe."

Felix couldn't stop the tears now, couldn't stop the flood of everything he had been trying so hard to hold back. He shook his head against Hyunjin, his voice coming out in broken gasps. "Jeongin... he... he's been working for her. For Seo

Jiyoung.”

Hyunjin froze, his arms still around Felix. “Who’s Seo Jiyoung?” he asked, his tone laced with confusion.

Felix’s words tumbled out, each one feeling like a knife twisting deeper into his chest. “She’s behind everything. She’s the one who made Jisung and Minho disappear. Jeongin’s been spying on us, on Jisung, on Minho. He knew everything, Hyunjin. He knew, and he didn’t say a word. He’s been helping her all this time.”

Hyunjin’s expression changed, his face going from shock to disbelief. “Jeongin? That doesn’t make sense. Why would he—”

“He said she threatened him. His family, his career—he said she would ruin him if he didn’t do what she wanted. But how could he? How could he betray us like that?” Felix’s voice cracked as the anger surged back, cutting through the guilt that had been drowning him moments before.

Hyunjin’s face softened in sympathy, but Felix could see the confusion in his eyes. “I don’t understand. Who *is* this Seo person? And why would Jeongin get involved with her?”

Felix wiped at his tear-streaked face, his heart still pounding with the weight of everything Jeongin had told him. “Jisung’s aunt. She is responsible for everything”

Hyunjin stayed quiet for a moment, processing everything Felix was saying. “And Jeongin... he was working for her?” The disbelief in his voice was thick, but Felix could tell he was trying to piece it together.

Felix nodded, wiping at his face again. “Yeah. He’s been keeping tabs on Jisung. On all of us. Feeding her information. I trusted him, Hyunjin. We all did.”

Hyunjin was quiet for a moment, his brows furrowed. He reached out, his hand resting gently on Felix’s knee. “I can’t believe Jeongin would do something like this. But Felix, this isn’t your fault.”

Felix shook his head, feeling the guilt twist tighter in his chest. “But I introduced him to Jisung. If I hadn’t—”

“No,” Hyunjin cut him off firmly. “You couldn’t have known. None of us could have. This isn’t on you.”

Felix’s voice faltered as the guilt overwhelmed him. “But if I hadn’t brought Jeongin into this, Seo wouldn’t have had a way to get to Jisung. She used *me*, Hyunjin. She used my connection to hurt them.”

Hyunjin’s expression softened even more, and he squeezed Felix’s knee gently. “You didn’t know. You couldn’t have known that Jeongin was being forced into this.”

“I should have,” Felix whispered, his voice raw with emotion. “I should have been more careful. I should have protected them.”

Hyunjin’s hands cupped Felix’s face, forcing him to meet his gaze. “You *have* been protecting them, Felix. This whole time. You’ve done everything you can to keep them safe.”

Felix’s tears welled up again, the weight of his guilt refusing to let go. “But I failed.”

“You didn’t fail,” Hyunjin said firmly. “You couldn’t have known. And you’re not the one who betrayed them. That’s on Jeongin—and whoever this Seo person is.”

Felix’s chest heaved with emotion, the tears spilling over again. “I don’t know what to do, Hyunjin. I don’t know how to fix this.”

Hyunjin pulled him into another hug, holding him tightly. “We’ll figure it out, okay? We’ll find a way to fix this. But you can’t blame yourself for what Jeongin did.”

Felix clung to Hyunjin, his sobs quieter now but still full of pain. He wanted to believe him, wanted to let go of the guilt that was tearing him apart, but it was hard. How could he ever forgive himself for being the link that allowed Seo to destroy everything?

Hyunjin’s hand stroked Felix’s back, his voice a soft murmur. “You’re not alone in this, Felix. We’ll get through it together.”

Felix didn’t respond, just buried his face deeper into Hyunjin’s chest, letting the weight of Hyunjin’s words settle over him. It wasn’t enough to chase away the guilt, but in Hyunjin’s arms, he at least felt like maybe—just maybe—he wasn’t completely alone.

For now, that would have to be enough.

Seungcheol sat in his office. Jeongin’s confession felt heavy in his mind, the words still echoing in his ears: “*She orchestrated the murder to incriminate Minho.*”

He had been the lead investigator from the beginning, digging through the details of the brutal crime scene, but everything had gone cold the moment Minho vanished. At the time, Minho’s sudden disappearance had felt like an admission of guilt, but now, Seungcheol wasn’t so sure. Too many things about the case had never fully added up.

His pulse quickened as he opened the email from Jeongin, his heart racing with anticipation. The attachments loaded slowly, and Seungcheol leaned closer, scanning through the documents. The evidence laid out before him wasn’t the result of careful investigation. It was planted—meticulously orchestrated to frame Minho.

Clicking through the files, he saw testimony records, altered surveillance footage, and fabricated timestamps.

Minho had been running not because he was guilty but because he had no choice. He had been cornered, with every piece of so-called "evidence" working against him. And Seungcheol had been part of the force that had driven him into hiding. All this time, they had been chasing a lie.

And now, Minho was missing—gone without a trace. Weeks had turned into months, and no one had heard from him. It had started to feel like he'd been swallowed up by the city itself.

Seungcheol's hands gripped the edge of his desk, his knuckles turning white. He knew he couldn't bring anyone else in on this—not yet. Too many people in his department had been eager to close the case when Minho ran, eager to cast him as the villain. Even Yubin, his boss, had pushed hard for Minho's arrest despite the flimsy evidence. He couldn't trust anyone with this information. Not until he figured out how deep this went.

But he wasn't going to let Seo Ji-young walk away with her crimes. This wasn't just about clearing Minho's name anymore. This was about justice.

He needed to build a case against Seo Ji-young. He would investigate her on his own, gather evidence, and uncover the truth behind her machinations. If she had the power to frame someone so completely, then there had to be a paper trail, a record of her deceit.

Seungcheol leaned back in his chair, taking a deep breath. He needed a plan. He would start with her connections, any potential accomplices she might have used to manipulate the situation. He could look into her financial records, her communications—anything that could lead him closer to the truth.

His heart raced with a mix of anxiety and determination. He couldn't waste any more time. The longer he waited, the more difficult it would become to unravel Seo Ji-young's scheme.

With renewed determination, he closed the email, mentally cataloging the crucial information Jeongin had provided. He couldn't involve anyone from the department yet. It was too risky. For now, this was his burden to carry.

Seungcheol grabbed his coat and stood up, a fresh sense of resolve settling over him. He was going to find Minho, no matter how long it took. He would expose Seo Ji-young for who she really was and bring her down. And when he found Minho, he would make sure that justice was served—not the kind that came from false accusations and twisted truths, but real justice. The kind Minho deserved.

But for now, all he had was the information in his mind and the knowledge that Minho was still out there, somewhere. And with each passing moment, he felt the urgency to act growing stronger.

3 days later

Seo Ji-young leaned against her desk, her fingers lightly tapping the edge as she stared out at the skyline. She raised the phone to her ear, her voice calm but with a chilling edge.

"We need to find him," she said, her tone detached, almost business-like. "Minho. He's going to cause trouble."

Her eyes narrowed as she spoke, as if seeing the scene unfold before her. "I want this taken care of immediately. No loose ends this time. We've let him run for long. I don't care how it's done, just make sure he doesn't make it out alive."

She paused for a moment, considering her next words. "Keep it clean. No connections, no mistakes. If anyone asks, Minho was never involved. He's been gone for months, and that's how it stays. Understand?"

Her voice dropped to a near whisper, but the weight of her command hung in the air. "I don't need to explain why this is necessary. You know what's at stake. Make sure it's done."

Seo ended the call, her expression still unreadable. She placed the phone down carefully, the brief moment of stillness giving way to a cold, calculating determination.

Jisung's heart raced as he stood frozen outside the door. His mind reeled from what he had just overheard. Seo Ji-young, his aunt, was planning to have Minho killed. She had spoken so casually, like it was just another business decision. But there was something more—something deeper behind her words. The way she spoke hinted at something far bigger than just Minho.

Without thinking, Jisung's feet moved toward the door. His hands shook as he twisted the handle, pushing it open with more force than he intended.

Seo looked up sharply, her face a mask of surprise that quickly hardened into something more dangerous. There was a flash in her eyes, something wild, before her face smoothed into a calm, collected expression. She raised an eyebrow, clearly not expecting him.

"Jisung," she said, her voice too smooth, too controlled. "What are you doing here?"

Jisung's fists clenched at his sides, his blood pounding in his ears. "I heard everything."

Her gaze flickered, but she didn't flinch. "I don't know what you think you heard—"

"I heard enough." His voice trembled with anger, cutting through her calm demeanor. "You're going to kill Minho. Why? Why are you doing this?"

Seo's eyes narrowed, and she stood up slowly from her chair, her presence suddenly overwhelming. She wasn't just his aunt anymore—she was something else. "You shouldn't be listening in on things you don't understand, Jisung. This is none of your concern."

Jisung took a step forward, unable to stop himself. "You have no idea what Minhoo means to me. And you're trying to kill him like he's nothing. Why? What are you hiding? What are you doing that's so important you'd kill to keep it secret?"

Seo laughed, a sharp, mocking sound that filled the room. "Minhoo was never something to you, Jisung. He was always a problem. A threat. He got too close to things he shouldn't have. Things you wouldn't understand."

"Then explain it to me!" Jisung shot back, his voice cracking with frustration. "What are you talking about?"

Seo stepped even closer, her eyes gleaming with a strange, almost manic light. "Power, Jisung. Real power. Not this petty game that people like Minhoo think they're playing. I'm talking about control over *everything*. And Minhoo... he's a loose end. He knows too much. He's poked his nose where it doesn't belong."

Jisung blinked, trying to process her words. "Control over what? What are you trying to do?"

Seo's expression darkened, her voice low and intense. "You wouldn't understand. But I'm going to make sure that when I'm done, no one will ever be able to challenge me. Not Minhoo, not anyone. I'm going to reshape everything, Jisung. And those who stand in my way? They'll be erased, just like Minhoo will be."

Jisung's breath caught in his throat. He took a shaky step back, his mind reeling. "You've lost your mind. This isn't just business anymore—you're talking about killing people for power. For some... delusion."

Seo tilted her head, her eyes gleaming with a mad ambition that made Jisung's skin crawl. "Delusion? You think I don't know what I'm doing? Everything I've done, everything I've built has led to this moment. You have no idea how close I am to *real* power. And Minhoo—he's just another sacrifice."

Jisung's hands shook as he stared at her, barely recognizing the woman standing in front of him. "You're insane," he whispered, the betrayal sinking deep into his chest. "Minhoo isn't a threat to you. He's just trying to survive. You're the one who's been chasing him, framing him, ruining his life."

Seo's eyes narrowed, and she stepped even closer. "You leave now, and I won't protect you. You'll be on your own out there, Jisung. No one will save you from what's coming."

Jisung's heart raced, but he stood his ground, his determination hardening. "I don't need your protection. I'll take my chances."

With that, he shoved the door open, ready to leave. But before he could step out, Seo's voice cut through the air, sharp and commanding. "Jisung, don't make me your enemy."

He paused, glancing back at her, anger and pain boiling within him. "You already are. I won't be a part of your twisted plans."

Seo's gaze darkened, a mixture of anger and something else—something almost desperate. "Think carefully about this. You have no idea who you're dealing with. If you walk away now, you might not like what you find waiting for you."

Jisung took a deep breath, his heart pounding. "I'm not afraid of you."

He stepped out of the office, his heart racing and he barely noticed as he made his way back to his room. He grabbed the laptop he had hidden before, his mind a chaotic swirl of thoughts and emotions and stepped out of the apartment for the first time since two months.

What was he going to do now? How could he find Minhoo? His heart sank at the thought of not knowing where he was or if he was safe. Seo's words echoed in his mind—her ambitions, her threats. He couldn't let her get to Minhoo. He had to warn Minhoo.

He headed to a nearby café, the familiar bell above the door chiming as he stepped inside. The air was warm, filled with the rich scent of coffee and pastries. Jisung found a quiet corner, set the laptop on the table, and took a moment to collect himself.

He opened the laptop, feeling the weight of the moment settle on his shoulders. He had to get this right. With shaking hands, he hit record and began speaking, his voice wavering but steady as he focused on the task at hand.

"Minhoo," he started, his heart pounding in his chest. "If you're watching this, please listen carefully. I need you to meet me at the place we talked about before everything happened." He took a deep breath, trying to push past the fear that gripped him. "I know you're in danger. Seo... she's dangerous. You need to be careful."

Jisung's mind raced, trying to find the right words. He didn't want to reveal too much, but he had to make it clear that Minhoo should stay alert. "I can't explain everything right now, but please, just trust me. If you can, come to that place. We need to talk. Just... stay safe, alright?"

He ended the recording and took a moment to gather his thoughts. After a brief pause, he uploaded the video to his social media, tagging Minhoo's account and hoping it would reach him.

Once it was uploaded, he sat back and watched the screen, waiting for the view count to climb. Almost immediately, notifications started popping up. People were commenting, speculating, sharing the video. Jisung's heart raced as he

realized the impact of what he had done. This could reach Minho, but it could also bring unwanted attention.

He left the café, stepping back into the bustling street, where people moved around him, oblivious to the turmoil that had just unfolded. He felt a surge of anxiety mixed with hope. Minho had to see it; he had to understand the danger he was in.

Chapter 26 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/150958570>)

Notes:

Hello

So I wasn't gonna post this particular chapter. It has literally 0 impact on the plot but it's fun. I heard that the story is getting intense so consider this a filler chapter.

Happy Reading!

As soon as Jisung's face appeared on the screen, the internet collectively lost its mind. The video spread within moments, its cryptic message sparking a tidal wave of speculation that churned through social media like a wildfire. The fact that Han Jisung, the long-missing heir to Han Holdings, was addressing Minho, a renowned choreographer turned wanted criminal, only added fuel to an already blazing fire.

Twitter Meltdown:

Within minutes of the video posting, fans, conspiracy theorists, and meme lords alike had flooded Twitter with reactions. Some were analytical, while others took the situation and ran straight to absurdity.

@StarryEyedSoo: "WAIT... Jisung's ALIVE?! I thought Minho kidnapped him! Now he's out here acting like they had a secret getaway planned? What is even happening?? #HanHeirReturns #WhereIsMinho"

@KDramaFanatic99: "So... Minho didn't abduct Jisung? Maybe they've been in hiding TOGETHER! This whole thing screams epic love story. Are they a couple?! @JeonginnieYang We need answers #Minsung 🥰❤️"

@MysteryLover23: "Did anyone else notice how calm Jisung was? He's either in on something huge, or he's been planning this escape for months. Minho probably isn't even the villain here. #HanConspiracy"

@SnackTimeDetective: "'Meet me at the place we talked about'? Bro, you're acting like we all got the map. Just drop the coordinates already! I'll bring snacks! 😊 #SoCryptic"

@ChillVibesOnly: "How much y'all wanna bet Minho's been hiding with Jisung this whole time, sipping fancy cocktails while we've been here losing our minds? 🤔 #WhereIsMinho"

@JusticeForJisung: "Minho ruined his career and dragged Jisung into it. This man doesn't deserve sympathy. He's a wanted criminal! #CancelMinho #HanHeirDeservesBetter"

@SavvySocietyWatcher: "Just because Jisung's back doesn't mean Minho's off the hook. He still disappeared right when everything went down. What's he hiding?? #JusticeForJisung"

@ConspiracyQueen: "Anyone else think Seo's the real puppet master in this? What if she had something to do with it? 🤨 #WatchYourBackSeo"

@TruthSeeker90: "Seo needs to be investigated. She's been way too quiet about all this. Why isn't she stepping up to explain what's going on? #SeoUnderScrutiny #WhoIsSeo"

@DramaFriendTag: "@LixieFelix We need to talk. You know I've been following this saga since day one. Let's break this down together. It's too much. 🤯 #InternetDetectives"

@MinsungForever: "Minho and Jisung OTP forever. Can we just talk about the tension in that video? They've been planning this whole time. #MinsungIsReal"

@JustForFun: "Plot twist: Minho's been teaching dance lessons in a secret underground lair while Jisung's been running his company from a laptop at Starbucks. 📱"

Instagram Explosion:

Over on Instagram, the drama reached peak intensity as fans started creating dramatic movie posters out of Jisung and Minho's faces. Dark, moody backgrounds, fiery captions, and bold titles like "Han & Lee: The Great Escape" and "The Choreographer & The Heir" plastered everyone's feeds.

@DramaQueen121: "Han Jisung—heir to an empire. Minho Lee—wanted criminal and choreographer extraordinaire. Together, they must fight the forces that seek to tear them apart... 🏠 Coming to theaters never! 🤔 #MinsungMovie"

People were convinced this saga was the greatest love story of the decade, with some posts going all-in on the idea.

@LoveStoryFanatic: "The way Jisung said Minho's name tho 🥰... You can't tell me this isn't a love story. Look at the tension! #MinsungEndgame #HanAndMinho"

Even the memes were top-tier, turning Jisung's intense expression into captions like "When you're trying to be serious but you sound like you're about to reveal a secret spy mission" or "Me telling my friends where to meet but making it sound like a Netflix thriller."

Reddit Chaos:

Reddit went completely off the rails. Theories flooded every subreddit dedicated to true crime, corporate conspiracy, and K-pop gossip alike. People started pulling out old articles, images, and videos, attempting to weave the wildest narratives.

r/KDramaAdventures: "Okay, hear me out. What if Minho and Jisung have been in on this from the start? This is a massive takedown of the Han family's corporate empire. It's like Ocean's Eleven, but with more chaebol drama."

u/CuriousCat: "This is all connected. Minho was framed. Jisung's video is proof that Han Holdings is hiding something, and Seo is somehow at the center of it all. What if Seo orchestrated the whole thing to get rid of Jisung? This is starting to sound like a movie plot!"

u/SkepticalObserver: "Not to be THAT person, but how does Seo fit into this? She's like a ghost! Maybe she's the mastermind who set everything in motion! #WatchYourBackSeo"

Some of the Redditors didn't take it so seriously, though.

r/LaughsAndConspiracies: "Jisung is out here acting like he's in Mission Impossible, and I'm just trying to figure out if Minho's still choreographing in secret. 😂 #CriminalChoreographer"

u/WildTheorist: "Y'all, Jisung and Minho are definitely living in a secret bunker, growing organic vegetables, and plotting the fall of corporate elites. Mark my words. They'll come out of this as billionaires. #SecretBunkerLife #Conspiracy"

The News Media Picks Up the Story:

The mainstream media wasn't far behind. Major news outlets and tabloids latched onto the story, reporting on Jisung's return and the continued mystery of Minho's disappearance.

"Heir to Han Holdings Reappears: The Mystery Behind Han Jisung and His Cryptic Message to Minho Lee"

"Is Minho Still a Fugitive? New Developments in the Han Holdings Heir Disappearance"

Tabloids had a field day with their theories, throwing in hints of a secret love affair and dramatic betrayals.

"The Choreographer and the Heir: Forbidden Love or Corporate Conspiracy?"

Daytime talk shows brought in panels of psychologists, true crime experts, and conspiracy theorists to break down Jisung's video frame by frame.

Dr. SarahH: "This changes everything. Jisung has been missing for months, and now we find out he's been in contact with Minho all along? There's clearly more going on behind the scenes."

Prof. TruthFinder: "Is this an inside job? Was Minho protecting Jisung the whole time? Or was he holding him captive? We still don't know the full story."

As the frenzy escalated, Jisung's video served as a turning point. With fans rallying behind him and the pressure mounting, whispers of investigations and leaks began circulating. It was a race against time to uncover the truth behind the tangled web of loyalties, secrets, and hidden agendas.

Every tweet, every post, and every news article pushed the narrative forward, weaving a story filled with love, betrayal, and conspiracy. The public was entranced, eager to see how it all unfolded.

Whatever the truth was behind the cryptic video, one thing was clear—the story of Jisung and Minho had reignited the world's obsession, and it wasn't ending anytime soon.

Series this work belongs to:

- Part 1 of Haven (<http://archiveofourown.org/series/4354204>)

Close (#)

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M/M

Stray Kids (Band)

Han Jisung | Han/Lee Minho | Lee Know
Hwang Hyunjin/Kim Seungmin
Lee Felix/Seo Changbin

Han Jisung | Han

Lee Minho | Lee Know
Lee Felix (Stray Kids)
Yang Jeongin | I.N
Hwang Hyunjin
Stray Kids Ensemble
Bang Chan (Stray Kids)
Seo Changbin
Kim Seungmin (Stray Kids)

Dancer Lee Minho | Lee Know
Murder Mystery
Han Jisung | Han-centric
Friends to Lovers
Slow Burn
Friendship
Redemption
Crime
Chaebol Han Jisung
Choreographer Lee Minho | Lee Know
no beta we die like men
Past Relationship(s)
Implied/Referenced Suicide
Implied/Referenced Cheating
Implied Relationships
Other Additional Tags to Be Added
Tags Are Hard
Lee Minho | Lee Know-centric
Angst and Hurt/Comfort
Everyone Needs A Hug
Betrayal

English Part 1 of Haven

In the Shadows of Haven

Infinity128

Chapter 27 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/58571383/chapters/151101565>)

The cabin was quiet. Minho sat slumped on the couch, staring at the ceiling, lost in thought. Felix had been pacing for what felt like hours, restless energy radiating off him. They had been going over the same conversations, the same theories, the same worries over and over again.

Minho's voice was hoarse from talking, but his mind was still in a whirlwind, thinking about Jisung. The gnawing uncertainty ate away at him.

Suddenly, Felix's phone buzzed in his hand. He glanced at the notification, eyes widening.

"Wait... Minho," Felix said, his voice sharp with surprise. "You need to see this."

Minho barely reacted at first, still lost in his head. But Felix's tone had changed—urgency now.

"What is it?" Minho muttered, sitting up a little, his brow furrowing.

Felix quickly tapped on the screen, pulling up a social media feed. "Jisung... he posted something."

Minho's body snapped into attention. "What?" His voice cracked, but he couldn't tell if it was from exhaustion or disbelief.

Felix shoved the phone in front of him, his hands shaking. "Look."

The screen showed a video, and there—clear as day—was Jisung's face. His expression was serious, eyes dark with urgency. Minho's heart skipped a beat.

Felix pressed play, and both of them were frozen in place as the video began.

Jisung's voice filled the room, "Minho, if you're watching this, please listen carefully. I need you to meet me at the place we talked about before everything happened. I know you're in danger. Seo... she's dangerous. You need to be careful."

Minho's breath hitched. It was *him*. Jisung was alive. And he was speaking directly to him. The room seemed to shrink, everything honing in on the video, the message. Felix was watching the screen just as intently, his lips pressed tightly together.

Jisung's voice cracked slightly as he continued, but his eyes stayed focused. "I can't explain everything right now, but please, just trust me. If you can, come to that place. We need to talk. Just... stay safe, alright?"

The video ended. The screen faded to black, and they were left in silence.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Felix blinked, his voice a whisper. "He's alive, Minho. He's alive..."

Minho couldn't speak. Relief hit him so hard that he felt lightheaded. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, face buried in his hands. "He's alive," Minho echoed, his voice thick with emotion.

Felix was already scrolling through the comments. "This is everywhere. Everyone's talking about it. People are trying to figure out what he meant."

Minho's mind was racing. The video had confirmed everything he feared. Jisung was alive, but Seo was still involved, still pulling strings in the background. And now... Jisung was calling for him, telling him to meet.

Felix looked at him, still processing the weight of what they'd just watched. "What do we do?" he asked quietly, but Minho could barely hear him over the sound of his pulse rushing in his ears.

Jeongin sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the wall in front of him, the weight of his actions pressing down like a heavy fog. It had been three days since he'd confessed to Felix about spying on Jisung and Minho for Seo, and the reality of his betrayal gnawed at him relentlessly. He could still hear Felix's voice, the hurt and disbelief cutting deep as he laid bare the extent of his cowardice.

His phone buzzed on the nightstand, but he ignored it, knowing it was probably just another notification about the chaos surrounding Jisung's viral video. A video that, once again, reminded him of how he had failed his friends. He had been paralyzed by fear, scared for his own safety and that of his family, allowing Seo's threats to dictate his actions.

The apartment was quiet, but in the silence, Jeongin could almost hear the echoes of his own shame. He had chosen self-preservation over loyalty, and now, he felt like a ghost in his own life. Every minute spent in solitude felt like a punishment, but he couldn't bring himself to reach out to anyone, to face the judgment in their eyes.

Jisung's video, Jisung was reaching out, putting himself at risk to warn Minho, while he had hidden in the shadows.

Suddenly, his phone rang, jolting him from his thoughts. The caller ID made his stomach drop—Seo. Jeongin hesitated, his heart racing. He could either answer and face her wrath or let it go to voicemail, but either choice felt like a defeat.

Taking a deep breath, he answered, trying to mask the tremor in his voice. "What do you want?"

Seo's voice was cold and menacing. "I know you went to the police, Jeongin. You think you're safe? You're just making things worse for yourself. You're useless now. Your life is over."

Jeongin felt anger bubbling up inside him, a feeling he hadn't allowed himself in days. "I'm not afraid of you anymore, Seo," he said, the words tumbling out with surprising conviction. "I won't let you control me anymore."

"Be careful, Jeongin. You don't know the consequences of your actions," she warned before hanging up.

The call ended, but instead of fear, Jeongin felt a flicker of determination ignite within him. He had to confront this, not just for himself but for Jisung and Minho.

With renewed resolve, he opened his laptop, got on his Instagram and hit "live." As the camera started recording, he took a deep breath, his heart pounding.

"Hey, everyone," he began, forcing himself to meet the camera with steady eyes

He steadied his breath, "I'm here to expose the truth about Seo Jiyoung," he declared, his voice growing stronger with each word. "She is Jisungie...", his voice broke, overcome with emotion. Clearing his voice, he continued after a few seconds, "She is Han Jisung's aunt. She's not who everyone thinks she is. She's been manipulating everything, and I—" He paused, anger flaring within him. "I let her control me. I let her make me her puppet."

His heart raced as he felt the gravity of what he was about to reveal. "Seo tried to frame Lee Minho for murder. She wanted to eliminate anyone who stood in her way, and I was too scared to speak out, too scared to help Jisung and Minho when they needed me."

As he spoke, his phone buzzed incessantly on the table beside him, the screen lighting up with notifications. Calls and messages poured in from his manager, flashing like alarm signals, but he ignored them. This was more important than any job or career. He felt like a caged animal finally breaking free.

“Seo Jiyoung is dangerous,” he continued, pacing the small room, his fervor building. “She’s been using her position to destroy lives, and I can’t stand by anymore. I’ve seen the lengths she’ll go to—threatening my family, threatening my friends. I was terrified of what she could do, but I realize now that living in fear is no way to live at all.”

@sneakyfox01: “OMG, is he serious??”

@inniee0208: “This is insane! I can’t believe he’s coming out like this!”

Jeongin felt a rush of clarity as he spoke, the weight of his guilt transforming into a burning desire for justice. “I should have protected Jisung and Minho instead of hiding in the shadows. I should have gone to the police sooner, but I let her threats cloud my judgment.”

@jisungIminho: “What’s the police got to do with this??”

@iamfoxxx: “Wait, did he say murder??”

He took a deep breath, emotions flooding through him. “But now, I want to make it clear: I am done being her pawn. I won’t let her win.”

Jeongin felt a surge of adrenaline, the comments validating his choice to go public. “This isn’t just about me. This is about all of us—about holding people like her accountable for their actions. I refuse to let fear dictate my life anymore. I refuse to be complicit. I’m ready to face the consequences for my actions. I am sorry for disappointing you all and breaking the trust you have in me.”

His heart raced, yet a sense of dread lingered. The buzz of his phone continued, almost drowned out by the adrenaline coursing through him. “Jisung, Minho, I’m sorry for what I did. I can’t change the past, but I will do everything I can to make it right. I understand if you guys hate me and want nothing to do with me ever again.”

As those final words left his lips, Jeongin felt a sense of purpose wash over him, a rush of adrenaline propelling him forward. He was no longer the scared boy hiding in the corner; he was a man ready to confront the darkness head-on.

His phone buzzed again, the screen filled with missed calls from his company, but he didn’t care. They could wait. For once, he was doing something that truly mattered.

Then, as he finished his live stream, the screen lit up with another call—this time, it was Bangchan. Jeongin’s heart sank at the sight of his name. He felt a wave of guilt crash over him. Bangchan had always been there for him, and now he was ignoring his calls.

He hesitated, the weight of his betrayal hanging heavily in the air. He thought of how Bangchan had always believed in him, how he’d been a constant source of support, and yet here he was.

“God, what have I done?” Jeongin whispered to himself, feeling the tears well up. He had wanted to be brave, to take a stand, but now the loneliness clawed at him, a stark reminder of the friendships he had jeopardized.

As the phone continued to buzz with missed calls from Bangchan, Jeongin slumped against the wall, the adrenaline fading away, leaving only the ache of regret. He wanted to reach out, to explain, but the words felt trapped in his throat. The fight against Seo had ignited a fire within him, but it had also burned away the connections he held dear.

After spending some time in the café catching up on the news, Jisung felt a mix of emotions swirling inside him. He had had the whole world in his fingertips ever since he got hold of the laptop but he had chosen to not look up anything about what’s happening in the outside world. Seo had kept him in the dark for so long and he had gotten too used to it. He was living in a bubble until it burst the day he discovered her plans. The headlines from the past few months he had read weighed heavily on his mind, but he knew he had to keep moving. He stood up, tucking the laptop under his arm, and stepped out into the bustling street.

As he walked, snippets of conversation from passersby caught his attention. He heard his name mentioned and paused, straining to listen.

“Did you see Jisung’s video? He’s back!” one girl exclaimed excitedly.

“Yeah, but have you seen Jeongin’s live stream? He’s going off about Seo!” another replied, her voice filled with intrigue.

Jisung’s brow furrowed in confusion and irritation. “What live?” he muttered to himself, his heart racing.

“Can you believe it? Jeongin is so brave for standing up” the first girl continued gushing, and Jisung felt a wave of anger wash over him. Jeongin had betrayed their trust, and now he was acting like a hero?

Jisung’s fists clenched at his sides, anger and hurt bubbling to the surface. He didn’t want to hear about Jeongin’s bravado; he wanted to confront him about everything—the betrayal, the spying, the fear that had kept them all in this mess.

Shaking his head, he decided to keep walking, blending into the crowd. He pulled the collar of his jacket up, trying to remain anonymous. Jisung had a lot to figure out, and he needed to stay under the radar for now.

Series this work belongs to: